THE LOVE STORY OF ABNER STONE



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THE LOVE STORY
OF
ABNER STONE

By
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TO HER

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Preface

IT seems a little strange that I, Abner Stone, now verging upon my seventieth year, should bring pen, ink, and paper before me, with the avowed purpose of setting down the love story of my life, which I had thought locked fast in my heart forever. A thing very sacred to me; of the world, it is true, yet still apart from it, the blessed memory of it all has abode in my breast with the unfading distinctness of an old picture done in oils, and has brightened the years I have thus far lived on the shadowed slope of life. And now has come the firm belief that the world may be made better by the telling of this story — as

my life has been made better by having lived it — and so I shall essay the brief and simple task before my fingers have grown too stiff to hold the pen, trusting that some printer of books will be good enough to put my story into a little volume for all who would care to read. And I, as I pursue the work which I have appointed unto myself, shall again stroll through the meadows and forests of dear Kentucky, shall tread her dusty highways under the spell of a bygone June, and shall sit within the portals of an old home whose floors are now pressed by an alien foot. Now, ere I have scarce begun, the recollections come upon me like a flood, and this page becomes blurred to my failing sight. O Memory! Memory! and the visions of thine!

THE LOVE STORY *of* ABNER STONE

I

IT is a long path which stretches from forty-five to seventy. A path easy enough to make, for each day's journey through life is a part of it, but very difficult to retrace. When we turn at that advanced mile-stone and look back, things seem misty. For there is many a twist and angle in the highway of a life, and often the things which we would forget stand out the clearest. But I would not drive from my brain this quiet afternoon the visions which enfold it, — the blessed recollections of over a score of years ago. For the sweet voice which speaks in

my ear as I write I have never ceased to hear; the face which the mirror of my mind ever reflects before my eyes I have looked upon with never-tiring eagerness, and the tender hand which I can imagine betimes creeping into my own, is the chiefest blessing of a life nearly spent.

There is no haunting memory of past misdeeds to shadow the quiet rest of my last days. As I bid my mind go back over the path which my feet have trod, no ghost uprises to confront it; no voice cries out for retribution or justice; not even does a dumb animal whine at a blow inflicted, nor a worm which my foot has wantonly pressed, appear. I would show forth no self-praise in this, but rather a devout thankfulness unto the Creator who made me as I am, with a heart of mercy for all living things, and a reverent love for all His wonderful works. The beauty

of tree, and flowering plant, and lowly creeper abides with me as an everlasting joy, and the song of the humblest singer the forest shelters finds a response in my heart. Without my window now, as I sit down to make a history of part of my life, a brown-coated English sparrow is chattering in a strange jargon to his mate on the limb of an Early Harvest apple tree, and I pause a moment to listen to his shrill little voice, and to watch the black patch under his throat puff up and down.

It is the fall of the year, and the afternoon is gray. At times an arrow of sunlight breaks through the shields of clouds, and kisses the brown earth with a quivering spot of light. Across the sloping, unkept lawn, about midway between the house and the whitewashed gate leading from the yard, a rabbit hops, aimlessly, his back humped up, and his white tail showing plainly amid

his sombre surroundings. I can see the muscles about his nostrils twitching, as he stops now and again to nibble at a withered tuft of grass. A lonely jay flits from one tree to another; a cardinal speeds by my window, a line of color across a dark background; and one by one the dry leaves drop noiselessly down, making thicker the soft covering which Nature is spreading over the breast of Mother Earth.

It may be that I shall not see the resurrection of another spring. Each winter that has passed for the last few years has grown a little harder for me, and my breathing becomes difficult in the damp, cold weather. Perhaps my eyes shall not again behold the glorious flood of light and color which follows the footsteps of spring; perhaps when the earth is wrapped once more in its mantle of leaves they shall lie over my breast as well. For man's years upon

this earth are measured in Holy Writ as threescore and ten, and come December fourth next, I shall have lived my allotted time. My ways have not all been ways of pleasantness, nor all my paths peace. But I am glad to have lived; to have known the hopes of youth and the trials of manhood. To have felt within my soul that emotion which rules the earth and the universes, and which is Heaven's undefiled gift to Man. From books I have gained knowledge; from the lessons of life I have learned wisdom; from love I have found the way which leads to life eternal.

Old age is treacherous, and it comes to me now that maybe I have delayed my work too long. For the mind of age does not move with the nimbleness of a young colt, but rather with the labored efforts of a beast of burden whose limbs are stiff from a life of toil.

But this I know, that there is a period in my existence which the years cannot dim. I have lived it over again and again, winter and summer, summer and winter, here in my quiet country home among the hills. There has been nothing to my life but that; first, the living of it, and then the memory of it.

It is my love story.

II

IN the spring of 1860, I was a lodger in a respectable boarding-house on Chestnut Street, in Louisville. My father — God rest his soul — had passed away ten years before, and I was able to live comfortably upon the income of my modest inheritance, as I was his sole child, and my dear mother was to me but an elusive memory of childhood. Sometimes, in still evenings just before I lit my student's lamp, and I sat alone musing, I would catch vague glimpses of a sweet, pure face with calm, gray eyes — but that was all. No figure, no voice, not even her hair, but sometimes my mind would picture an aureole around her head. I have often

wondered why she was taken from me before I could have known her, but I have also striven not to be rebellious. But she must have been an unusual woman, for my father never recovered from her loss, and to the day of his death he wore a tress of her hair in a locket over his heart. I have it now, and I wear it always.

I was of a timid disposition, and retiring nature, and so my acquaintances were few, and of close friends I had not one. My mornings and evenings were spent with my books, and in the afternoons I took solitary walks, often wandering out into the country, if the weather was fine, for the blue sky had a charm for me, and I loved to look at the distant hills, — the hazy and purple undulations which marked the horizon. And Nature was never the same to me. Always changing, always some beauty before undiscovered bursting on my

sight, and her limitless halls were full of paintings and of songs of which I would never tire. Then, as evening closed in, and I would reluctantly turn back to my crowded quarters, the sordid streets and the cramped appearance of everything would fret me, and almost make me envious of the sparrow perched on the telegraph wire over my head. For he, at least, was lifted above this thoughtless, hurrying throng among which I was compelled to pass, and the piteous, supplicating voice of the blind beggar at the corner did not remind him that even thus he might some day become. And thus, when my feet brought me to the line of traffic, as I returned home, I would unconsciously hasten my steps, for the moil and toil of a city's strife I could not bear.

In the spring of 1860, these long walks to the country became more frequent. I had been cooped up for

four rigorous months, a predisposition to taking cold always before me as a warning that I must be careful in bad weather. And the confines of a fourteen by eighteen room naturally become irksome after weeks and weeks of intimate acquaintance. It is true there were two windows to my apartment. A glance from one only showed me the side of a house adjoining the one in which I stayed, but the other gave me a view of a thoroughfare, and by this window I sat through many a bleak winter day, watching the passers-by. One night there was a sleet, and when I looked out the next morning, everything was covered in a gray coat of ice. A young maple grew directly under my window, and its poor head was bent over as though in sorrow at the treatment it had to endure, and its branches hung listlessly in their icy case, with a frozen raindrop at the end of each twig.

The sidewalks were treacherous, and I found some amusement in watching the pedestrians as they warily proceeded along the slippery pavement, most of them treading as though walking on egg-shells. There went an old gentleman who must have had business down town, for I had seen him pass every day. This morning he carried a stick in his hand, and I discovered that it was pointed with some sharp substance that would assist him, for every time he lifted it up, it left a little white spot in the coating of ice. There went a schoolboy, helter-skelter, swinging his books by a strap, running and sliding along the pavement in profound contempt for its dangers. A jaunty little Miss with fur wraps and veiled face, but through the thin obstruction I could plainly see two rosy cheeks, and a pair of dancing eyes. Her tiny feet, likewise, passed on without fear, and she disappeared.

Heaven grant they may rest as firm on every path through life!

Next came an aged woman, who moved with faltering feet, and always kept one hand upon the iron fence enclosing the small yard, as a support. Each step was taken slowly, and with trepidation, and I wished for the moment that I was beside her, to lend her my arm. Some errand of mercy or dire necessity called her forth on such a perilous venture, and I felt that, whatever the motive be, it would shield her from mishap. And so they passed, youth and age, as the day wore on. In the afternoon the old gentleman re-passed, and I saw that his back was a little more stooped, and he leaned heavier on his stick. For each day adds weight to the shoulders of age.

And now a miserable cur came sniffing along the gutter on the opposite side of the street. His ribs showed plainly

through his dirty yellow coat, the scrubby hair along his back stood on end, and his tail was held closely between his legs. And so he tipped along, half-starved, vainly seeking some morsel of food. He stopped and looked up, shivering visibly as the cold wind pierced him through and through, then trotted to the middle of the street, and began nosing something lying there. A handsome coupé darted around the corner, taking the centre of the road. The starving cur never moved, so intent was he on obtaining food, and thus it happened that a pitiful yelp of pain reached my ears, muffled by the closed window. The coupé whirled on its journey, and below, in the chill, desolate grayness of a winter afternoon, an ugly pup sat howling at the leaden skies, his right foreleg upheld, part of it dangling in a very unnatural manner. A pang of compassion for the dumb un-

fortunate stirred in my breast, but I sat still and watched. He tried to walk, but the effort was a failure, and again he sat down and howled, this time with his meagre face upturned to my window. The street was empty, as far as I could see, for twilight was almost come, and cheery firesides were more tempting than slippery pavements and stinging winds. The muffled tones of distress became weaker and more despairing, and I could endure them no longer. I quickly arose and cast off my dressing-gown and slippers. In less than a minute I had on shoes, coat, and great-coat, and was quietly stealing down the stairs. Tenderly I took the shivering, whining form up in my arms, casting my eyes around and breathing a sigh of relief that no one had seen, and thanking my stars, as I entered my room, that I had not encountered my landlady, who had a great aversion to cats and dogs.

It was little enough of surgery I knew, veterinary or otherwise, but a simpleton could have seen that a broken leg was at least one of the injuries my charge had suffered. I laid the dirty yellow object down on the heavy rug before the fire, and he stopped the whining, and his trembling, too, as soon as the soothing heat began to permeate his half-frozen body. I knew there was a pine board in my closet, and from this I made some splints and bound up the broken limb as gently as I could, but my fingers were not very deft nor my skill more than ordinary, and as a consequence a few fresh howls were the result. But at last it was done, and then I made an examination of the other limbs, finding them as nature intended they should be, with the exception of a few scars and their unnatural boniness. So I got one of my old coats and made a bed on the corner of the hearth, to

which I proceeded to transfer my rescued cur. He was grateful, as dogs ever are for a kindness, and licked my hands as I put him down. And he found strength somehow to wag his tail in token of thankfulness, so I felt repaid for my act of mercy, and very well satisfied. A surreptitious visit to the dining-room resulted in a purloined chunk of cold roast beef, and two or three dry, hard biscuit, which I found in the corner of a cupboard. Thus laden with my plunder, I started back, and in the hall came face to face with my boarding-house mistress.

"Why, Mr. Stone, what in the world!" she began, before I could open my mouth or put my hands behind my back.

"I — that is — Mrs. Moss, I have a friend with me to-night who is very eccentric. He has been out in the cold quite a while, and he dislikes meeting

strangers, so that I thought I would let him thaw out in my room while I came down and got us a little bite. You need n't expect us at supper, for I have enough here for both."

"If it pleases you, Mr. Stone, I have no objections. But I should be glad to send your meals to your room as long as your friend remains."

I had reached the foot of the stair, and was now going up it.

"He leaves to-morrow, Mrs. Moss, — I think. Thank you for your kindness," and I dodged into my room and shut the door.

My charge was waiting where I had left him, with bright eyes of anticipation. I took a newspaper and spread it on the floor close up to him, and depositing the result of my foraging expedition on this, I stood up and watched him attack the beef with a vigor I did not suppose he possessed.

"Enjoy it, you little wretch!" I muttered, as he bolted one mouthful after another. "I came nearer telling a lie for you, than I ever did in my life before."

Then I made myself comfortable again, drew up my easy-chair, and lit my lamp, and with pipe and book beguiled the hours till bed-time.

III

I NAMED him Fido, after much deliberation and great hesitancy. My principal objection to this name was that nearly every diminutive dog bore it, but then it was old fashioned, and I had a weakness for old-fashioned things, if this taste could be spoken of in such a manner. I had really intended setting him adrift after his leg was strong, but during the days of his convalescence I became so strongly attached to him that I completely forgot my former idea. He was great company for me, and after I had given him several baths, and all he could eat every day, he was n't such a bad-looking dog, after all. The hair on his back lay down now, and his pinched

body rounded out till I began to fear obesity, while his tail took on a handsome curl. Altogether, I was rather proud of him. But the result of my crude attempt at surgery became manifest when I finally removed the splints. The limb had grown together, it is true, but it was dreadfully crooked, and a large knot appeared where the fracture had been. When he tried to walk, I discovered that this leg was a trifle shorter than its mate, and poor Fido limped a little, but I believe this only added to my affection.

Winter held on till March, and then reluctantly gave way before the approach of spring. The wind blew; the sun shone at intervals; the ice began to melt, and muddy rivulets formed in the streets. When the ground dried up a little, I began my afternoon walks, Fido limping cheerfully along beside me. One day my commiseration for

his affliction almost vanished. We had strolled away out past the streets, and had been walking along a pike, when the refreshing green of a clover meadow on my left caused me to climb the fence and seek a closer acquaintance. Fido wriggled through a crack at the bottom, and as I sat on the top rail for a moment, the little rascal suddenly gave tongue and shot out across the meadow after a young rabbit, which was making good time through the low clover. That lame leg did n't impede my yellow pup's running qualities, and I had to call him severely by name before he gave up the chase. He came panting back to me with his dripping tongue hanging out, and with as innocent a look on his face as one could imagine. I felt that he needed a gentle chastising, but there was nothing lying around wherewith to administer it, and I did not search for the necessary

switch. But I wasted no more sympathy on that crooked right leg.

I became interested in the view before me, and forgot that time was passing. The clover meadow stretched away to a low bluff, at the base of which I could see the shining surface of a small stream. Far to my right a field was being broken up for corn. The fresh scent of the newly turned earth came to my nostrils like perfume. On the farther side of the field a patient mule was plodding along, dragging his burden, a plough, behind him, and I heard the guiding cries of the driver as he spoke in no gentle voice to the animal which was wearing its life away for its master's gain. A meadow lark arose a little to one side. I noticed his yellow vest, sprinkled with dark spots, as he flew with drooping tail for a few rods, then sank down again in the clover. From somewhere in the dis-

tance a Bob White's clear notes welled up through the silence. A flutter of wings near by, and I turned my head to see a bluebird flit gently to the top of a stake in the fence-corner not far away. They were abroad, these harbingers of spring, and I knew that balmy breezes and bursting buds came quickly in their wake. How sweet it was to know that earth's winding-sheet had been rent from her breast once more; that the shackles had been torn from her streams and the fetters loosed from her trees; to feel that where there had been barren desolation and lifeless refuse of last year's math would soon appear green shoots of grass, and growing flowers; that the tender leaves of the trees would whisper each to each in a language which we cannot understand, but which we love to hear. Especially at eventide, when the heat of the day is softened by twilight shad-

ows, and a gentle breeze comes wandering along, touching with fairy fingers the careworn face and tired hands.

The sun had sunk below the horizon. As I now directed my gaze to the western sky, one of those rarely beautiful phenomena which sometimes accompany sunset in early spring, was spread before me. Spanning the clear sky, stretching from western horizon to zenith, and from zenith to eastern horizon, was a narrow, filmy band of cloud. And by some subtle reflection of which we do not know, the whole had caught the golden sheen of the hidden sun, and glowed, pale gold and pink and saffron. The sky was clear but for this encircling cloud-band, and my fancy saw it as a ring girding the earth with celestial glory, — a fitting path for spirit feet when they tread the upward heights. I watched it pale, with upturned face, its changing tints in themselves a mira-

cle, and thought of the wonders which lay beyond it, which we are taught to seek. Thought of what was on the other side of that steadily purpling curtain stretched above me which no human eye might pierce. Groves of peace and endless song and light which never paled; my mother's face —

A star blossomed out in the tranquil depths above me, white and pure as a thought of God; some dun-colored boats were drifting in an azure sea out in the west, and a whippoorwill's plaintive wail sounded through the dusk from adown the fence-row. Up from the still earth there floated to my nostrils the incense of a dew-drenched landscape, — fresh, odorous, wonderfully sweet, — and a fire-fly's zigzag lantern came travelling towards me across the darkening meadow. Everything had become very still. It was that magic hour when the voices of the things of

the day are hushed, and the things of the night have not yet awakened. Only at intervals the whippoorwill's call arose, like a pulse of pain. The voice of the ploughman in the adjoining field came no more to my ears; a respite from labor had come to both man and beast. The birds were still. There was no flutter of wings, no piping cry. The earth rested for a spell, and a solemn quietude stole over the scented fields.

I knew that I ought to be going — that I ought to have gone long ago, but still I sat on the topmost rail of the fence, which stretched away like a many-horned worm on either side of me. Supper was already cold, but I had been a little late on several occasions before, and Mrs. Moss had very kindly laid something aside for me. I was one whom she called "a queer man who saw nothing outside of his books," and

while this was not altogether true, inasmuch as I was even now missing both supper and books for another delight in which my soul revelled, still she bore with my eccentricities, and I was thankful to her. "You should fall in love, Mr. Stone," she said to me one day, half jestingly, "and that would get you out of some of your staid ways." I replied with a smile that, as she did not take young ladies to board, there was small chance of that, and had thought of her remark no more. But now, in the tender gloaming of an April day, I felt that I did love, and with as ardent a passion as any man ever owned. I loved the rich sunlight, which I had watched fade away, but which still lingered in my breast. I loved the greening of Nature, and the yellowing of her harvest. I loved the soul-expanding influence of sky and air, and the far-reaching, billowy fields. All things

that grew, and all things that moved in this, God's kingdom, I loved. What else was there to love? A woman? Yes; but they lived for me only in the pages of history and romance, and it was not likely that I, a bookworm bachelor of forty-five, would ever meet the one to stir my heart. And I feared them, a little. Out here, under the sky, with no one to hear but Fido and the dumb silence, I can make this confession. I knew she lived, somewhere, the one to whom my heart would cry, because this is the plan of the Creator, but I was glad that our lines of life had not crossed.

So please Him, thus would I live content.

IV

THE last bright streamer had disappeared, but still there remained a faint, chaste glow above the dark line of hills. An unseen Hand had sown the sky thickly with stars, and more fell to their appointed places as the moments passed. A bull-frog boomed out his guttural note, and Fido began to whine and gnaw at the rail just below my feet. He was getting hungry, and I acquiesced to his wordless plea to go home. Night had now come, and the air was chilly, so I buttoned my coat close up to my chin, and moved briskly. We were some distance from home, but the lights of the city were reflected in the sky, and besides, it was not dark, be-

cause of the stars, and the road over which we went had but one end.

I ate in quiet satisfaction the lunch which Mrs. Moss had saved for me, but when I tried to interest myself in Emerson, a few minutes later, I found that one of my favorites bored me. This sudden lack of appreciation of the great essayist annoyed me, and I forced my eyes to traverse line after line, hoping that the pleasing charm which they had always held for me would return. But this policy proved futile, so at length I quietly closed the book and put it down on the table, disgusted with myself. Perhaps my mind required something in lighter vein, and there was my bookcase, with its glass doors open, as they usually were. But the delightful metre of the "Lady of the Lake" seemed halting and tame to me that night, and this volume I did not close as gently as I had the former one, but flung it care-

lessly on the table and walked nervously to the window and raised the sash. For a moment — only a moment — I stood there, trying to find a few stars through the curtain of factory smoke which hung overhead, and letting the cool air blow about me. Then I put the window down, and came back to my easy-chair, satisfied, for I had solved the riddle of my unrest.

That afternoon's walk had showed me of what I was depriving myself. It dawned upon me in that moment that the pastoral joys which I had known that day were dearer to my soul than printed pages and the mind-narrowing captivity of four walls. Out there were unbounded possibilities for the mind and soul, lessons to be learned, pages to be read, secrets to discover, — a message in each soft gurgle of the brook; a whisper from each stirring leaf; a hidden story in the dreamy face of each

flower. All of these became voices in my ears; I could listen to their singing and sighing for hours. What an awakening it was! I had been dreaming for over half my life, and with a sigh I looked at the well-worn tomes in my bookcase, which must now take second place in my heart. They had served me well. True and tried friends, into whose faces I had looked in both joy and sorrow, and never failed of consolation or delight. I would never desert them — God forbid! They were grappled to my soul with hooks which would neither bend nor break, and which could not fall away. Still would I come to them and caress them with loving fingers as I held them in my lap; still would I ask their advice and store my mind of their knowledge, for they had lightened too many hours of my life to be forsaken now, — it would be like giving up a friend of twoscore

years for one newly found. And I loved them none the less, — in the full flush of the secret which I had discovered I knew this, and I walked over to where the long rows stood like phalanxes, and ran my hands lovingly over the sheepskin and vellum backs. And, 'pon my soul, they seemed to respond to my fingers, as though I had touched hands with a friend! They may have been dumb, but they were not lifeless; for the spirits of their creators still lingered between the leaves, and made them live — for me. Good friends, rest easy on your shelves; one by one each of you shall come down, as you have always done, and commune with me. When Nature sleeps, then we shall revel.

I sat down again, and stretched my feet out towards the low fire. With pipe newly filled, I caressed it between my joined hands, and thought. After

a half hour of smoking and ruminating, I came to a conclusion. I would move to the country for the summer! What a dolt I had been all these years! The matter of board need not be considered, for that was cheaper in the country than in town. When winter came again, I could return to my present quarters, if I chose. What I wanted was a quiet old farmhouse with as few people in it as possible, and located in the blue-grass region of the State. Then life would be one endless delight, — days afield, and peaceful, noiseless nights. To be awakened in the morning by the matin song of the thrush; to breathe the intoxicating odor of honeysuckle and jessamine; to step out into the dew-washed grass, instead of upon the hard pavement, and to receive the countless benedictions of the outstretched arms of the trees as I walked beneath them. Where had my mind been a-wandering

all of these years that I had not thought of this before? But I was too sensible to mar my present joy with useless regrets. The future was bright with anticipation and rich with promise, and my heart grew light.

And Fido — poor Fido — would be glad of the change, too, for I am sure it must have taxed his love for me to stay in the goods-box which I had converted into a kennel and placed in the small backyard. Mrs. Moss, — honest soul, — when giving her reluctant consent to this, consoled herself by thinking that she was only yielding to another of my vagaries.

There was no one else to consider, and so I put the thing down in my mind as settled. I would leave this soul-dwarfing, cramped, smoke-hung atmosphere, and take up my abode where the air was pure, and where the sun could shine. Mrs. Moss would lose

a good, quiet boarder, it is true; but my consideration for Mrs. Moss's feelings would not cause me to sacrifice myself. Some one else would come and take the room which had been mine for ten years, and I would soon be forgotten.

The revelation which I had experienced put me in such high spirits at the glorious prospects before me that I could not think of going to bed when eleven o'clock sounded from the mantel-tree. Instead, I believe I actually chuckled, as I slipped my hand into the pocket of my dressing-gown for my tobacco-pouch, and proceeded to fill my pipe again. Method had always been the rule of my life, but that night I put it by for a space. The question paramount was—where should I go? Certainly most any farm housewife would give me a room upstairs for a small money consideration a month, but I was

a little particular, and wanted to live and move among *folks*, for which I was fitted by birth and education. I knew that blood as blue and as genteel flowed through country veins as through city arteries; but how was I to find these people out? I didn't know a dozen persons in Louisville outside of my boarding-house. The hands of the clock were getting dangerously near together at the top of the dial before a solution came.

Suddenly I bethought me of Reuben Walker, that staid, long-headed fellow who had graduated with me back in forty. The nearest approach I ever had to a friend. He had gone to practise law in Springfield, down there in Washington County, and had made something of a name for himself, too. I hadn't seen him since forty-five, hadn't written to him since fifty, but he was the only man living I knew who

could help me. So I forthwith indited a note to Reuben Walker, Esq., Attorney-at-Law, reminding him of our former intimacy, regretting that we had allowed ourselves to drift apart, and asking if he knew of a quiet country home where I might spend the summer. I reasoned that it was a country lawyer's business to know everybody in his county, and I hoped that Reuben remembered me well enough to refer me only to the kind with whom I would care to affiliate. I did not write letters often, my correspondence averaging perhaps a half dozen epistles a year, and so I signed my name to this one before reading it over. Then I recollected one of the earliest injunctions of my father: "Be very careful what you sign your name to," so I deliberately reread the missive before me. It was all right; I had said all that was necessary, but just as I was

bending the sheet to fold it I stopped, spread it out again, and, taking up my quill, wrote as a postscript:

"I much prefer a home where there are *no* young ladies."

V

IN due time an answer came. It was with considerable anxiety that I broke the seal, but there was a smile upon my face when I finished reading the short, friendly letter which he had sent me. He knew a place that would suit me exactly. Mr. and Mrs. Grundy were an elderly couple who lived about eight miles north of Springfield. They belonged to the aristocracy of the county, and lived in a two-story brick house on a magnificent farm. They were warm friends of Reuben's, and he felt no hesitancy in declaring that they would board me throughout the summer and fall. So positive was he of this fact that he wrote me to come whenever I pleased,

and he would have everything arranged by the time I got there. He added a postscript, in answer to mine, stating that his friends were childless, and he did not think I would be bothered by any young ladies.

My elation at the success of my plans thus far was so apparent that it was openly remarked upon at the tea-table that evening. And so I told them all then and there of the change I was about to make. Of course there was a chorus of regrets that I was to leave, which I could not believe genuine, since I was so unsociable. But meeting Mrs. Moss in the hall as I started to my room, I explained to her that my health demanded an immediate change of air, and that for no other reason would I have gone. This the good lady accepted smilingly, and wished me much happiness in my new home.

There were not many preparations

for me to make. My books and my wardrobe packed, my landlady paid, a modest demand on my bankers, and I was ready. It was in the latter part of April, in the midst of a steady downpour of rain, that I took my seat in the four-horse coach, with Fido between my feet. I remember the feeling which came to me when the huge vehicle started. I felt that I was almost leaving the earth, despite the rumbling and the jolting, when I thought of my destination. The heavy clouds and the swishing rain held no gloom for me. For above the clouds was the broad, blue sky, with the sun somewhere in it, and somewhere beyond the curtain of the rain was light and warmth and blooming fields. My heart was beating riotously, for this trip was really an adventure to me, who had not been anywhere for nearly twenty years. The coach was empty but for us, Fido and

me, and it will seem queer to some when I say that I was very thankful for this. But I did not care to talk to people who were nothing to me, and who I might never see again. I much preferred to be in solitude, and muse upon all that my new life would hold for me. The rain stopped all at once, so suddenly that I would have been surprised had it not been April, and through the soiled glass of the coach door, now thickly streaked where the raindrops had run down it, came a blunted arrow of sunshine.

My trip would have been a tiresome one under ordinary circumstances, but I did not feel the least fatigue during all the long journey. I shall never forget the morning we rolled into Springfield, and drew up before a small frame building opposite the court square. A plain board suspended above the doorway of this building bore the simple

inscription, "Reuben Walker, Attorney-at-Law." Here was the place where my friend gave legal counsel in exchange for legal money. I caught sight of his broad, humorous face ere the coach had given its final jolt as it came to a standstill. Directly in front of the office before which we stopped were two large locust-trees, and under these trees that bright spring morning quite a little company had gathered. There was a sudden explosion of laughter as the stage-driver descended from his perch and opened the door for me to alight, and a quick glance showed me that some joker had reached the climax of his narrative just at that moment. Before I could rise from my seat, the coach door was darkened by a figure, a strong hand was thrust into mine, and I was fairly dragged into the arms of Reuben Walker, who gave me hearty greeting. To this I responded quite as heartily.

Fido had whisked out of his narrow quarters, and had begun to stretch himself in many wild contortions. I proceeded to reckon with my stage-driver, then Reuben took me by the hand, and leading me up to the men whom he had just left, he made me acquainted with each and every one. Most of them I have forgotten, for they went out of my life as speedily as they entered it; but one I remember yet, for he was afterwards governor of our beloved commonwealth. This was Proctor Knott, and he it was who had exploded the joke just as I arrived. I quietly joined the company, and listened to some more of this gifted young lawyer's yarns. The ringing of the court-house bell soon after caused a dispersion of the crowd. Some of them went with the lawyers to the court-room, others strolled down town, and Reuben and I were left alone.

"Come in, come in, Abner," he said, bluffly, and he led the way into his office.

A square table covered with green baize stood in the centre of the room. A box filled with sawdust sat upon the floor to serve as a cuspidor; three or four splint-bottomed chairs completed the office furniture. One of these I occupied, placing my hat upon the table, and Reuben took another, stretching out his short, fat legs, and crossing his hands over his bulging front.

"I 'm glad to see you, Abner, 'pon my honor," he began, smiling so that his rubicund visage glowed with good feeling. "How did you take a notion to come to the woods?"

"I was cramped," I answered truthfully. "The city's smoke was stifling me, and I wanted a breath of fresh air."

"You 'll get enough of that down at Henry Grundy's. That 's the only cool

place in the county in midsummer. And if you 'll take my advice and straddle one of his thoroughbreds once a day, you 'll get some color in your face. I 've fixed everything for you. You 're to have a front room on the ground floor, and pay twelve dollars a month. That 's cheaper than stealing it. But you don't want to make a hermit of yourself when you get down there. Come up and spend a week or two with me. Miss 'Pheme [his wife] will be mighty glad to see you. She makes me walk chalk, but she 'll be easy on you. You 're going to be with mighty fine folks, — the cream of the county. They were very particular at first, but I vouched for you, and that settled it. Henry said he 'd be in this morning after you. He 's a Presbyterian and a Democrat, and talks to you as though you were deaf, but he 's harmless. Why don't you tell me 'bout yourself?"

I saw at once that my good friend still insisted on doing all the talking, — one of the traits of his young manhood, — and when I told him that he had n't drawn breath for five minutes, he seemed surprised.

"There 's not much to tell about myself, Reuben," I replied. "I 've been living alone, — reading, smoking, and thinking a little. Then I fancied that I 'd like the country, and here I am."

"Where 'd you get that?" He jerked one squat thumb toward my crippled retainer.

"Picked him up out of the street several months ago, after he 'd been run over by a carriage."

"Same soft heart as ever, Abner. Remember when one of the boys at school poked that nest of damned little English sparrows out of the gutter? There was about sixteen of 'em, and you gathered the ugly little devils up

into your new hat and tried to raise 'em. Don't — you — re-member, Abner?"

His fat sides shook, as he ejaculated the last sentence with difficulty.

"Yes," I answered, smiling. "My efforts were useless, for the little fellows all died. I felt sorry for them."

"I wish they were all in — hello! yonder's Henry, by jolly!"

I looked out of the window, and saw an old-fashioned rockaway draw up beside the curbing. The horse which drew it was a high-headed bay; the harness and the vehicle were spotless. A negro lad of near twenty, black as the night before creation, sat on the front seat, and on the rear seat was a man worth looking at twice. As the negro hastily scrambled down and opened the door, this gentleman alighted. He was a trifle over six feet tall; his face was wrinkled and kindly; his brows were gray and shaggy, and

his eyes were gray. A patriarchal white beard flowed down over his breast, and his suit was of black broadcloth. Such an evident air of gentility sat upon him, that I mentally congratulated myself that I was to be associated with him. An instant later I heard his stentorian voice in the hall.

"Walker! Walker! Is that fellow Stone here yet? I can't wait all morning for him, for there's plenty of ploughin', and plenty of lazy niggers back at the farm! Hello! Why, is this Stone?"

And the hand that closed over mine was strong with the strength of the soil.

VI

"I MUST get some things for the boss, then we'll start home," announced Mr. Grundy, after we were seated side by side in the rockaway. I noticed with gratification that his voice had sunk a few notes. He had looked askance at my yellow pup when I lifted him to a place at our feet, but had only queried, "Is that part of your baggage?" and had not demurred. His next speech was rather mystifying, for I had understood from Reuben that this man was certainly lord of his manor, and presided in a lordly way.

"The boss?" I asked, with a puzzled look, whereat he burst into a laugh that hurt my ears.

"Bless me! I forgot that you were a bachelor," he replied, when his risibles had subsided sufficiently for him to talk. "If you ever marry, you'll find out who 's boss. The niggers call me boss and Marse, but *Sallie's* boss of our plantation!"

We drove about town for perhaps half an hour, purchasing a supply of groceries, then our horse's head was turned towards the open country.

"Antony 'll take us home in less than an hour," said Mr. Grundy, eyeing with pride the easy, far-reaching strides of the big bay. "That's the best horse in my stables, Stone; there can't anything in the county catch him. I've taken premiums with him at every fair in the circuit ever since he was a yearling. It's a day's work for a nigger to drive him to town and back, for he pulls on the lines every inch of the way, and it takes good muscles to hold him in."

My companion did most of the talking on the road home. I addressed a few polite questions, then fell to viewing the country through which we were being whirled. The world was waking after its annual nap. The odor and charm of spring pervaded the air. Tree-buds were bursting, and tender leaves were spreading their tiny hands to the gentle sky. Immense expanses of green wheat waved by the roadside, and each small blade bowed its head to me in welcome. A pair of bluebirds flitted from stake to stake of a rail fence at our right. Yonder two gentle undulations prepared for corn swelled and fell away. Wherever I looked was freshness and verdure, and the starting into life of green things beneath the magic wand of spring. She holds the key to earth's resurrection, and she alone can unlock the myriad gateways of the sod. And what a host comes forth when her

luring breath falls upon the barren ground! — cereals, flowers, mosses, vines, and the thousand little things which have no name. Forth they come exulting, — the nightshade and the lily, the thistle and the rose. And on the broad bosom of their mother there is room for each, and from her breast each draws its life.

A gray turret surrounded by evergreens drew my eyes to the left. I pointed to it with the question, "Can you tell me what that is?"

"St. Rose, — a convent founded by the Dominicans in the early part of the century. We'll drive over some day and take a look at it. That's the church you see, — a fine piece of masonry."

Then I grew silent again, becoming absorbed in the changing landscape. The road now led along the margin of a creek, bounded on the farther side by

densely wooded hills. We had been gradually descending for several miles, and had now reached a great basin, wherein lay the fertile lands of my host. A sudden turn to the right, and a beautiful valley stretched before us. Part of it had yielded to the plough, and the brown, friable soil bespoke richness and boundless possibilities for corn. Farther on were meadows, reaching like green carpets close up to the white-washed fences. And in the distance — behold my future home! It sat upon the crest of a gentle eminence back of those verdant lowlands, and was almost hidden by elms and oaks. These trees filled the big yard, too, and some were burdened with tangled grape-vines. Leaving the highway, a curving road led us up to the yard gate. As we drove slowly up the avenue to the large two-story brick house, a sense of unexpected happiness and quiet stole over

me. Here was the Mecca of my vague desires. Here, in the midst of pastoral beauty, a kind Providence had sent me, and here, with the blue-grass all around, and peace in my heart, I would be happy.

"Mother!"

The powerful voice at my elbow made me jump. By the time we reached the ground, the double front doors were open, and standing there was one of the sweetest-looking old women I had ever seen. She was clad in dignified black, with a white kerchief at her throat, and her gray hair drawn smoothly back from a kind, broad brow. Hat in hand, I mounted the huge stone steps which led to the porch, while that big voice came from below.

"This is Stone, mother! Show him his room and make him comfortable! I 'm off to see 'bout the young lambs that came last night!"

It was a hospitable, friendly greeting which I received from the mistress of the house. Her voice was low and pleasant to the ear, and there was culture in every tone. The room into which she ushered me was delightfully cool and shadowy. The ceiling was high, the windows broad and deep, with green slat-curtains. The rocking-chair and the sofa near one of the windows were covered with haircloth. The centre-table was a beautiful piece of mahogany; sitting in the middle of it was a vase of jonquils. In one corner was a bookcase, empty — ready for my treasures. Everything was as it should be. I at once expressed my thanks and my satisfaction, and the good lady retired, saying that I was doubtless weary, and needed to rest a little.

Left alone, I stood still a moment, and looked about me. The paper upon

the walls represented red-top clover in bloom, and I was glad of this. Hanging about the room were some old-time portraits in gilt frames, and some pictures representing historical events. Some dried-up cat-tails lifted their brown heads from another vase on one end of the tall mantel. A screen covered with wall-paper stood before the fireplace. Hastily I lifted it aside, and there — yes, there was the blackened chimney, the andirons, and the stone-laid hearth. If I have a weak point, it is an old-fashioned fireplace.

Dinner came just as I finished my toilet, and I followed Mrs. Grundy out into the broad hall, onto a latticed porch, and into the dining-room. The good things that were piled upon that table would have fed a regiment, but all who sat down were my host and hostess, and myself. Mr. Grundy asked a blessing, and his voice was just as loud as though

he were hallooing to one of his negroes across a field. Surely the Lord heard that petition. In two minutes my plate was heaped high, and I had to put back other dishes till a later moment. When he had fairly settled himself to the business of eating, my host began to talk.

"Walker tells me that you're not used to mixing with people much, Stone, but I'm afraid it'll be lonely for you 'way out here. We don't have much company, and of course the niggers don't count. You can ride about the farm with me if you want to, and mother can hold her own at talking. When S'lome gets back, things'll be different. She's a whole houseful herself."

I almost dropped the piece of ham I was conveying to my mouth. Had Reuben betrayed me! What did this talk of "mother" and "Salome" mean? When he first spoke the word "mother,"

I had paid no particular attention to it; but when coupled with that other name, it took a deeper meaning.

"I — I — I understood you had no children," I said, trying to conceal my dismay by bending over my plate.

"Quite true, quite true, Stone. We've never had a child born to us. I got in the habit of calling the boss mother, from S'lome."

"Who is Salome?" I asked, but my voice was so weak that it scarcely conveyed the question.

"Bless me! did n't Walker tell you? I'll wring the rascal's neck for forgettin' S'lome. Why, man, she's the pride of this farm, and the queen of every heart on it! S'lome? Who's S'lome? Ask any nigger or dog in the county, and they'll tell you. She's our 'dopted daughter, man, off to Bellwood for her second year, and 'll be home the fifth of June, God bless her!"

VII

LIKE most country folks, my new friends went to bed shortly after sundown. About nine o'clock, I took my pipe and my tobacco-pouch, and crept noiselessly out to the front porch. I had noticed a quaint settee there upon my arrival that morning, and I had no trouble in finding it now, for a ghostly moonlight had settled over everything. My mind was confronted by a question of decidedly more moment than any under which it had at any time before labored, and I had to think it out before I could sleep. If my cherished and faithful pipe, together with solitude and the wondrous silence of a night in spring,

could not bring a solution to me, then the question was certainly beyond me.

"— And 'll be home the fifth of June, God bless her!"

I think they were the last distinct words I heard at that meal. I remember mumbling something about the pleasure in store for me, and while my tongue pronounced this statement, my conscience denounced me as a liar. It would be no pleasure. An upstart of a boarding-school girl, with her airy ways, her college slang and her ear-piercing laughter, tearing around the house like a young cyclone, having girl friends and boy friends hanging around continually, — the thought was not encouraging, and I groaned in spirit, and puffed away, setting misty shallops afloat upon the sea of moonlight. And these little shallops must have borne away as cargo my fretting and my fears, for presently I fell into a philosophic mood, and the future

looked brighter. One thing was sure — I could not run away. That would be cowardice, as well as an affront to hospitality. And did the worthy man snoring in a near-by room once know that I thought of leaving because his idol was coming, he would doubtless hasten my departure by turning loose upon me the pack of fox-hounds I had heard clamoring for their supper a few hours before.

And, too, there were five weeks yet before this wonderful being would arrive. During this time I would walk, and accustom myself to riding, and when this paragon did come, I would leave her in full and free possession of the house throughout the day. It was not near so bad as it had looked at first. By eleven o'clock I felt able to sleep, if not entirely reconciled to the new order of things. "Sufficient unto the day —" I thought, with a sigh, and knocking

the ashes from my cold pipe into the palm of my hand, I threw them over the railing of the porch, and went to bed.

The days passed for me now like a procession of pleasant dreams. The more I became acquainted with my host and hostess, the more I identified myself with their way of living, and the more I realized that I had fallen among people of exceedingly gentle blood. They were aristocratic, and perhaps a little too high headed for their near neighbors, and had but few callers, and no visitors. The practically limitless farm was under the direct general supervision of old Henry Grundy, and he was consequently a very busy man, and seldom at home except at meal-times. I soon learned that the slaves all loved him, for he was slow to anger, and always just. Out of the thirty negroes on the place, I was given a

youth of perhaps eighteen to be my body-servant. He was to black my boots, keep my clothes dusted, hold my stirrup, take care of my horse, and do anything else I wanted him to do. This negro I dubbed Inky, in deference to his pronounced color.

I was allowed to sleep late in the morning, — a privilege for which I was grateful. Often I would accompany the master on his tours of inspection, riding a dapple-gray gelding which was placed at my disposal, and which was exceedingly well behaved, as became an animal of his good breeding. Then solitary walks became part of my daily routine. Accompanied only by Fido, and carrying a walking-stick of stout hickory, I explored the hills and valleys which stretched for miles in every direction. Oftentimes I was gone all day, and the good people whom I had begun almost to love were very indul-

gent to me, never complaining when I was late to a meal, or when my roving spirit kept me out till after nightfall. I had a key to the front door, and was careful to enter noiselessly on these occasions. I had never been back to Springfield, and so had had no opportunity to upbraid Reuben for his treachery. But, indeed, upon rereading his letter, I saw that he had told me the truth, and at the same time had made me the victim of a joke. These people had no children, and my friend had simply forbore mentioning the adopted daughter.

Salome, — a beautiful name and an unusual one. I found myself thinking upon it one afternoon, as I lay stretched upon a bed of moss in one of the deepest recesses of the hills. I had never heard it before out of the Scriptures. She who wore it ought to be a beautiful girl. "Salome, Salome," I

caught myself murmuring, gazing dreamily up through the lace-like young foliage above me to where two fluffy clouds were wandering arm in arm along the pathways of the air. What would she look like, this Salome? Would she be fair or dark, and would her ways be gentle or tomboyish? A sudden realization of the trend of my thoughts made my cheeks tingle ever so slightly, and I brought my eyes to bear upon Fido. This ever-restless canine had chased a timid little ground-squirrel into a hole when we first arrived at this spot, and had subsequently torn up enough leaves and dirt to fill a moderate-size grave in his efforts to dislodge his quarry. He did not know that I was watching him, and his antics were therefore perfectly natural. He had dug a slanting ditch perhaps a foot deep in the soft loam, and when my eyes fell upon him had

stopped for a moment to get his wind. He stood planted firmly on his four short legs, his tail vibrating incessantly, like the pendulum of a clock. His muzzle was grimy with soil; his head cocked on one side, and his ears pricked, while his beady little eyes narrowly watched the hole before him. His lolling tongue was dripping, and he was panting like a lizard. And I thought to myself, if men would attack an obstacle like that dumb brute, there would be fewer failures in life. All at once, and without warning, the pup leaped to the attack once more, and the way he worked would have done credit to a galley slave. His shoulders undulated with the ferocity of his movements, and dirt flew in a shower from between his hind legs. Now and again he would pause, and thrust his nose as far up in the hole as he could get it. A moment thus, while the wagging tail still moved,

then he would draw back, snort the dirt from his nostrils, and with an eager whine renew his efforts.

With the deepening shadows came the thought that I was several miles from home, so I arose reluctantly, picked up my stick, and, with Fido limping at my heels, walked slowly back through the enchanted aisles of Nature.

The Saturday night following, a week before her arrival, I heard the story of Salome.

I was on the old settee after supper, as usual. Here I always came to smoke my pipe after the evening meal. Somewhat to my surprise, Mr. Grundy came out and sat down beside me. Frequently he and his wife came out for a short time in the early evening, but this night it was nearly nine o'clock when I heard the old gentleman's heavy step in the hall. I made room for him when

I saw that it was his intention to sit down, and offered him my tobacco, for I saw that he held a cob pipe in his hands, — another unusual thing. He took my tobacco in silence, and in silence filled his pipe and lit it. I felt that he had something to say to me, so I waited patiently, and we both puffed away.

"S'lome 's comin' a week from to-night," he said, at last. His voice was softer than I had ever heard it, and a caressing note lurked in it. "Seems a long time to us since she went away last September. S'lome 's comin' home," he repeated, as though the very sentence brought joy.

"It 's right for me to tell you 'bout her, Stone, since you 're to be one of us for quite a spell. It 's a sort o' sad story, but me an' mother 've tried to make her forget the beginning of her life. It may be that you don't like

young girls much, seein' that you've never married, but there'll be a kind spot in your heart for S'lome when you hear 'bout her. You see, it began away back yonder when I was a young fellow at school. Bob Summerton was a classmate of mine, and my best friend. His one prevailin' weakness was a woman's pretty face. He was a poor fellow, and had no business marryin' when he did. His wife, highly connected, but without any near relations, was killed in a railway accident. Their little girl, who had been born six months before, escaped unhurt. Bob was a Kentuckian, from the soles of his feet up, and one day, when S'lome was only three years old, he was shot by a coward for defending a woman's good name. He telegraphed me to come, and I reached him in time for him to consign to my keepin' the child soon to be orphaned again. It nearly broke my

heart, Stone," — the strong man choked back something in his throat, — "but even at that tender age the young thing's grief was pitiful. I brought her here, and me and mother — well, we 've done what we could to make her happy — God bless her!"

The last words were in a husky whisper, and I knew that tears which had started from the heart were glistening in the eyes of that grand old gentleman.

"She 's not so big, and she 's not so little," he went on, presently, for I knew of nothing to say at this juncture. "Just kind o' medium size, and as sweet as the Lord's blessed sunshine. She ain't ashamed to keep the house clean, and help mother, either. It 's always May-time 'bout the old place when she 's here, Stone. She 's tender-hearted as a lamb, and 'll nuss a chicken with the gapes for half a day. But the

horse don't run on this farm that she's afraid to ride. And when me or mother are ailin', she 'll sit by us night and day —says she's 'fraid to trust a nigger with medicine. And she's got our hearts so 't they 'd almost stop beatin' if she told 'em to. She 's ridden on a load o' hay many a time, and has gone to the wheat-field to help us with the thrashin'. And she 's comin' home next Saturday, Stone."

He stopped again, and I knew that he was thinking. Presently he arose, and stretched his arms with a yawn.

"You 'll like her, Stone, if you 're a human. Good-night."

"Good-night," I answered, and his heavy boots thumped across the porch to the hall door.

That night, for the first time in my life, a girl's face crept into my dreams.

VIII

THE next week passed more swiftly than any of its predecessors had done since I came to this idyllic spot. House-cleaning began on Monday, and under Mrs. Grundy's experienced eye the half-dozen negresses employed in the work moved with alacrity and precision. But what with beating carpets, scrubbing floors, and turning things topsy-turvy in general, the task was not accomplished with any considerable despatch. A man is a cumbrous article at house-cleaning time, as any housewife will aver, and Mr. Grundy, recognizing this fact, betook himself to the neighboring Little Beach River to fish, and let "the boss" tear up things to

her heart's content. His request that I should accompany him was almost a warning, so I assented, for my room was not to be spared in the general overhauling. Inky and Jim — Mr. Grundy's factotum — went along to pitch our tent and attend to the cooking.

I was not a disciple of Walton, and as a consequence my success was anything but extraordinary; still I derived a hearty enjoyment from the outing.

Did you ever lazy along a river-bank in May, and just live, and fish, and smoke, and do nothing else? If you have not, you have missed a very great pleasure. If you fail to catch many fish, it does n't matter much. There is a certain spell in the air which defies *ennui*, and a kind of tonic steals into your blood which makes it tingle through your veins, much as the rising sap in the young trees, I imagine. You

rise in the morning and bathe your eyes open in a near-by spring, whose crystal cool water is like the touch of a healing hand. Then comes breakfast of bacon, coffee, and good, light bread. Then your pipe comes as naturally as a deep breath of the forest-scented air, and you take your rod and minnows and wander up the bank through the weeds and the dewy grass. Under the shadow of that old, half-sunken log is where the bass stay. The water is deep and clear, and your hook sinks with a low gurgle, like an infant's laughter. What matters it whether a bite comes at once, or not? You sit in a hollow formed by a curving tree-root, rest your back against the tree-trunk, and are very contented. The other side of the stream is lined with endless stretches of trees, — sycamore, elm, dogwood with their starry eyes peering in innate vanity over the bank

into the mirror beneath them, and underbrush of all descriptions. Where the tide has once been, and receded, is a stretch of yellow clay, now glistening from the dews of night. After a while the sun strikes this, and the wet surface glows like gold. Then your wandering eye — for you have forgotten your cork — observes a bubble as it rises and bursts midway across the stream, and you idly watch the widening circle which radiates from it. Then in the centre of the circle the tiniest dark spot appears, which gradually assumes the shape of a black, shining head. It remains stationary for a while, then slowly moves to the opposite bank. A disc-like shell is lifted, two broad feet dig their claws into the mud, and Mr. Turtle drags himself up high and dry for a sunning.

The delightful silence is suddenly broken by the harshest of chattering,

and a crested kingfisher descends like a shot from some dead limb high up in the very tree under which you are sitting, and, skimming low over the surface of the water, finally disappears without his prey. Then the pole is almost jerked from your careless hands, and, if you have luck, a fine bass is floundering at your feet in a few moments. Then another spell of sitting and dreaming, while you lay your pipe aside for a while, and look up to where a squadron of fleecy argosies are drifting calmly along to some unknown bourn, bearing, mayhap, behind their filmy bulwarks the simple prayers of trusting children.

Dinner-time comes too quickly, but it is over soon, and you seek a new haunt, and stretch your legs out, and thank the Lord that you are alive. Above you and around you is the fragrant new life of blooming things, and

the odor of the woods is as rare and sweet as some strange perfume. As the sun goes down slowly, the shadows lengthen across the river. The little wood violets nod on their slender stems by your side, and dusk creeps upon you like a caress. The bird notes grow still, and a gentle rustling comes from the leaves, and falls upon you like a benediction from Nature. After supper you lie upon your bunk in the tent, and drowsily watch the stars wink at you through the open door. Then the bull-frogs' lullaby begins, and you drift into dreamland listening to that deep chorus from the river banks.

I passed four days like this, — elysian days to me. Friday we went back home, and the next day she came.

The household was astir very early that morning, as was natural and proper that it should be, considering the event which was to happen. Contrary to

my custom, I was up before the sun, and I smiled, in an amused way, at the extra touches which I almost unconsciously put to my dress. I actually halted over my necktie, but decided at last upon a black string, as most becoming to my age and quiet habits. The gray streaks about my temples seemed to show more plainly than usual, as I carefully brushed my hair. I put on some clean cuffs, too, though the ones I had been wearing were not soiled.

At breakfast everybody was happy. Mrs. Grundy beamed from behind the tea-urn, and put three spoonfuls of sugar into my tea instead of two. Mr. Grundy succeeded in upsetting his cup of black coffee, and laughed at it as though it were a joke, and even the mulatto maid who moved deftly about the table wore a broad grin. One thing was on the mind of each: Salome was coming home.

The carriage was waiting at the front door when breakfast was over. Two darkies had been rubbing on it for an hour, and not a speck could be seen anywhere. There were two horses hitched to it this time, as fitted the occasion. A span of high-strung blacks, with white feet, and they gave the negro at their heads all he could do to keep them from going. They chafed their bits, and stamped, and fretted at the delay, their tiny feet eager to be speeding away. The master was going alone to meet his darling. Springfield had no railway, and Salome was to arrive at Lebanon, eighteen miles distant, by noon. Mr. Grundy came out arrayed in his best, as though he was going to meet the Queen of England. His strong old face was alight with a great happiness, as he bent and kissed his wife, then leaped down the steps like a school-boy. He shouted back his adieus

to each of us; the negro on the front seat gathered up his lines, and braced his feet; the negro standing at the head of the team loosened his hold, and stepped swiftly to one side. There was a prancing of slender limbs, a tossing of two black heads, and they were gone. There were tears of joy in the eyes of the good woman at my side when I looked at her.

"She 's coming, Mr. Stone, and we 're all so happy!"

That was all she could say. Her voice broke, and with a smile on her sweet old face she turned away into the house to hide her emotion.

The day was a restless one for me. I took a book, and went down to a rustic seat under an elm tree. But the book lay open on my crossed knees without my eyes ever seeking its pages. I was thinking of Salome — of the wonderful charm which made every one

love her. Elderly women, married women, I had known and liked, but school-girls were my especial abomination. Truth to tell, I had never known any, and I did not want to know any. Even this paragon I would have gladly escaped had there been a way. But flight was impossible, and since I must meet her, it was quite natural to wonder what she was like, and to brood upon the mystery of her ensnaring all about her. I was ashamed of my restlessness. The rustic chair grew uncomfortable, and I paced up and down. The damp grass deadened the shine of my boots, and I walked back to the house and summoned Inky to put them in shape again. Even this African's face was beaming like a freshly polished stove, and I became almost irritated.

"What are you grinning about?" I demanded, as he bent to his work with blacking and brush.

"Miss S'lome's comin' home, Marse," he panted, rolling his white eyes at me in ecstasy.

"Are you very glad?" I continued.

"Yas,'r, I is. Miss S'lome's jes' so sweet that honey can't tech 'er. She picked a br'ar out 'n my foot once, Marse; out 'n my ugly, black foot. An' she hel' it in her lap, too, an' it nuvver hurt a speck."

I did not say anything more. I knew now why the birds were singing so sweetly that morning, and why the squirrels in the yard were frisking so gayly. Everything was glad because she was coming home.

The big bell on the tall pole behind the house rang at eleven that day instead of half past. And away out in the fields hearts were quickened in black bosoms. The slaves left the plough in the furrow, and the corn undropped, and hurried home. The summons at

this unusual hour meant that something out of the ordinary had happened. It was the master's order, and as they all came trooping in with inquiring faces, and stood grouped near the back porch, Mrs. Grundy appeared, and told them briefly that their young mistress was coming that afternoon, and that there would be no more work that day. They cheered the news with many a lusty shout, and the pickaninnies rolled over each other, and the youths turned handsprings, while upon each face was a look of high good humor.

About four o'clock Mrs. Grundy and I repaired to the settee to watch the road, which could be seen for perhaps a mile, winding through the valley. Then around the corner of the house began to appear the vassals of this Kentucky lord. The stain of the soil had been washed from their hands and faces, and their cotton shirts were clean, though

patched and worn. The negresses, also, appeared, with their kinky hair done up in multitudes of "horns," and tied with bits of the most extravagant-colored ribbon that their wearers possessed. Every one was attired in his best, as though on a holiday occasion, which, in truth, this was.

"Dar dey come!"

A six-year-old piece of midnight suddenly made this announcement in a shrill treble key, and all eyes were turned at once towards the highway. A carriage and a span of blacks were sweeping up the road. Mrs. Grundy gave some orders in a low, yet positive tone, and in a trice two rows of slaves were standing along each side of the avenue. They were going to give her royal welcome. Mrs. Grundy stood upon the lowest step, and I modestly remained upon the porch, leaning against one of the massive pillars. I can

scarcely describe my feelings at that time now, but I think my nerves were in a condition similar to that of the small boy when he makes his first speech at school. They had reached the meadow, and were coming up the slow incline. I could see nothing as yet but a straw hat, a white blur beneath it, and a brown travelling suit. Through the wide-open yard gate they rolled. Then those who had been called together to welcome her gave cheer after cheer, and waved their hands and hats above their heads.

"Hi, Miss S'lome!" from a sturdy field hand.

"Hi, baby!" from an old mammy.

"Howdy, Missus!" from a housemaid.

"Hi, Mi' 'Ome!" from a pickaninny in arms.

And so the welcome greetings fell upon her. And from out the pande-

monium a high, sweet voice thrilled into my ears.

"Hello, Sambo! Here's Aunt Cynthy! Look how 'Lindy has grown!"

It was almost like the confused panorama of a dream. The horses stopped; a lithe figure leaped, unaided, to the ground; I heard that dear word "mother," — and Salome was home.

IX

I DESCENDED the steps, and stood at a respectful distance. I saw a gray head and a brown one side by side, and caught faintly the whispered love of youth and age. Arms were at length unclasped, and Mrs. Grundy presented me. A sudden upflashing of dark eyes was the first impression I received from the face turned towards me. She made me a low courtesy, and held out her hand, and I took it and bowed over it with the best grace of which I was master.

"I am glad to see you, Miss Salome," I said, truthfully, for my feelings had undergone a wonderful revulsion, despite my indifference of that morning.

Sometimes a moment is long enough to change one's whole being.

"I am so pleased to find you here." Her voice was low, well bred, and modulated. "Mother and father are very lonely after I go away. They love me far more than I deserve," and she smiled back at them as they stood hand in hand watching us. "Now, if you will excuse me, I will shake hands with all of these good friends."

She nodded pleasantly in response to my bow, and moved away with a certain gliding step. Straight to an old black mammy she went, and threw herself into the good creature's arms. Then right and left she turned, while they crowded around her, shaking hands with all. Some horny hands she took could have crushed hers like a flower; but everywhere were expressions of love and respect. And she was the gladdest thing there. The genuine affection she

felt for all the negroes was shown in her cordial greetings.

The carriage was driven away, the blacks dispersed, and the rest of us retired to "mother's room," which was situated back of mine. The two old people hovered about their returned darling like parent birds over a strayed fledgeling which had come back to the nest. I took a seat apart, and, joining in the conversation but rarely, studied the girl who sat in a large rocking chair, and who talked as volubly and as entertainingly as any one could have wished. She was, as Mr. Grundy had said, of medium build. Her form was youthful, but possessed of that subtle roundness which betokens the approach of womanhood. Two dainty feet darted in and out beneath her skirt as she rocked to and fro. Her face was not beautiful, but the features were delicate and fine. Her lips were as red as rich

blood could make them, the upper one pouting ever so slightly, and the soft brown hair was parted in the middle and drawn back from an exquisite forehead. The dark brown eyes were the girl's chief charm. They danced and sparkled in impish mischief, and had a way of shooting sudden glances which made themselves felt as keenly as arrows. And crowning it all was a sweet grace and womanliness which was good to see. From that hour my opinion of a school-girl changed.

After supper all of us gathered on the front porch. Mr. and Mrs. Grundy occupied the settee; Salome and I sat upon the porch at the top of the steps, she leaning against one pillar, and I against the other, across from her. Of course she did the talking, and while most of it was about the things which had happened at school, I found myself listening with increasing interest. I

soon discovered that it was the music of her voice which held me, — soft, rich, speaking in perfect accents. Her narrative was frequently interrupted by bursts of bubbling laughter, as some amusing incident was remembered and related. Very suddenly she stopped.

"Listen!" she said, and turned her head sideways, holding up one finger.

Through the silence which followed came the twanging notes of a banjo.

"It's Uncle Zeb!" she announced, in a loud whisper. Then to me, impulsively, "Don't *you* like music, Mr. Stone?"

She leaned towards me, as though it was a vital question which she had propounded.

"Very dearly," I answered promptly. "This is the first that I have heard since coming here."

"It's a jig, and he's playing it for me — the old darling! I must go to him, or he would be hurt."

She arose swiftly, and gathered up her skirts.

"Will you come, Mr. Stone, since you love music? We won't stay long."

I mumbled something, and got up, a trifle confused. Such perfect candor and lack of artificiality was a revelation to me. She placed her disengaged hand upon my arm at the bottom of the steps.

"Uncle Zeb almost raised me," she explained, as we took our way around the house towards the darkey cabins. "He 's taken me to the fields with him many a time, and I was brought up on that tune you hear him playing. He always plays it when I come home — look at them now!"

The cabins were all built in a locust grove to the rear of the house. To-night the negroes had lighted a bonfire, and were making merry in the old-time, ante-bellum way. Seated upon

broken-down chairs, or strewn upon the grass in various attitudes, these dusky children of misfortune watched the performance of an exceedingly black old uncle, who, sitting upon a bench before his cabin, was picking the strings of a banjo almost as old as himself. His bald head, surrounded by a fringe of gray wool, shone brightly in the firelight, he was rocking his body rhythmically backwards and forwards, and keeping time with one foot upon the hard earth. As we came into the circle of firelight we were discovered, and there was a quick movement, and a deferential giving way. My companion took her hand from my arm, and the action seemed to draw me much nearer the earth than I had been for the past two or three minutes. The musician stopped playing when he became aware of our presence.

"Bress de Lawd, honey chile! Am

dat you? 'Pears to me a' angel mus' 'a' drapped down frum de sky!"

"This is your little child, Uncle Zeb," she answered with feeling, "and I have come out here to listen to you play."

"De ol' man can't play 'less de feet 's a-goin'," he replied, shaking his head solemnly. "You know you 's al'ays danced fur ol' Zeb."

A darker color came to her cheeks, and she turned smilingly to me.

"Uncle Zeb taught me a jig when I was a wee thing in pinafores. He will never play for me unless I dance for him. You know he thinks I am still a child of eight or ten. If you think it 's not — real nice, I won't ask you to stay."

The roguish upcasting of starry eyes, and the deprecating little manner, tied my tongue for the instant.

"I shall be glad to stay, if you will permit me."

This much I managed to utter, and as she bowed assent, I went and leaned against the cabin wall, by the side of Uncle Zeb. This was done partly to give her all the room she needed, and partly to secure a support for myself, for a strange weakness had begun to assail my limbs.

There was an eager, anticipative move on the part of the negroes. They nudged each other, and whispered, grinned broadly, and shifted their positions to where they could obtain an unobstructed view. Salome stood bareheaded, with arms akimbo, waiting for the music. The travelling suit had been discarded, and she was dressed in a simple blue dimity frock which showed the perfect curves of her figure to charming advantage. Uncle Zeb, with characteristic leisure, was in no hurry to begin. He twisted the screws and thrummed the strings in a very wise

manner. At length the instrument was tuned to his satisfaction, and then his claw-like fingers began to move with astonishing rapidity. I looked at Salome. She was standing perfectly still. Then, as the music quickened, I saw her supple body begin to sway, like a lily's stem when a zephyr breathes upon it. Her hands dropped to her sides, and daintily lifting her gown above her feet, she began to dance. Gently at first, and with such ease that she barely moved. Then the step receded, advanced, and grew faster. Her tiny feet twinkled, and tapped the earth in perfect time and rhythm. Such living grace I had never looked upon! The bending form, the flushed face, and the dancing feet, the grouped negroes and the old musician, — the picture was burned into my memory like painting is burned upon china in a kiln. My breath came quicker, and my face grew hot. I

scarcely knew when she stopped, but for the wild cheers of the spectators. Then, flushed and laughing, she came and cast herself upon the bench by Uncle Zeb.

"Yo' do it better eb'ry time, chile!" declared the old fellow, highly delighted that she had danced to his playing.

"And you gave it better than ever before! Did I shock you, Mr. Stone?" She turned to me with a look of deep contrition.

I sat down beside her, and spoke my mind.

"I never saw anything like it. But don't fear that you shocked me. I wish that I could see the same thing every evening."

"You 're good not to mind it. Mother and father think it sweet, and I dance for them sometimes. Now, if you don't mind, we will go back. I 'm a little tired to-night from my journey. Good-

night, Uncle Zeb," she patted the old man's hand. "Good-night, Lindy, Jane, Dinah, Sambo, Tom—all of you!" She waved her hand, and, to a chorus of answering good-nights, we moved away.

X

THE grandfather's clock which stood in the hall struck twelve. My eyes seemed loath to close in sleep. It is true I had not gone to bed till half-past eleven, but usually Sleep sat upon my pillow, and proceeded to blindfold me a few minutes after my going to bed. To-night, upon reaching my room, I had read and smoked, and smoked and read, until my nerves had been brought back to their normal state. It fretted me not a trifle to know that a girl from boarding-school had upset me. But the ingenuous frankness of this young being, the unaffectedness which waited upon her every movement,

had wrought such demolition to my theories that I was slow in recovering my equipoise of thought. At length I strolled through a mazy vista to oblivion, surrounded by a dancing throng of seraphs.

My rest was untroubled, and when I threw open my window-shutter the next morning, and gazed out with sleep-blurred eyes, my first impression was that things had become topsy-turvy, and that a soft sky studded with stars lay before me. But as reason swiftly dominated my brain, I saw that instead of the phenomenon which had at first seemed apparent, there was only the bluegrass lawn thickly sown with dandelions, as though some prodigal Crœsus had strown his wealth of gold broadcast. Perhaps the lowly, modest yellow flowers were but imitating the glittering orbs which had looked down upon them throughout the night — who

knows? For is not reasoning man oftentimes just as vain, when he seeks to clothe himself with a majesty which is not for mortals?

For several days I adhered to the plans which I had laid out before the coming of Salome. I rode with the master about the farm, took my solitary walks with Fido, as usual, and spent most of each evening in my room, alone. If left to the dictates of my own will, there is no telling how long this would have continued. But one morning, at breakfast, my host surprised me with the words:

"Stone, you remember the old St. Rose church you spoke of? It's worth looking at, but the Lord knows when I'll have a chance to go with you. S'lome's a great favorite with the sisters over at St. Catherine's, which is about a half mile from St. Rose, and I heard her tell mother yesterday that she was

going to ride over to pay her respects this morning. Me and my folks are Presbyterians, but nearly all of our neighbors are Catholics, and good people, and we like them. Now if you 'd like to go 'long, I don't s'pect S'lome 'd mind showin' you 'bout the place."

He looked at the daintily clad figure at my side with an interrogative smile.

"It would be a great favor to me," I put in hastily. "I had been thinking of late I would have to go alone, but if Miss Salome would not object, I should be pleased to go with her."

"Of course you may," she answered readily. "I love both places very much, and the sisters are so sweet. Sister Hyacintha is my favorite, — a dear old nun with the face of a saint. Do you like old-timey, quiet places, Mr. Stone? St. Rose church is perhaps the oldest building in the county. St. Catherine's is not half a mile from it,

and the sisters conduct a boarding-school there. Had I been a Catholic, I doubtless would have received my education at that place."

I quickly assured her that I looked forward with much pleasure to our little trip, and asked her if we were to go horseback, or in the carriage.

"Oh, horseback!" she exclaimed, with the delight of a child. "I believe you are a good horseman," she added archly.

"Only fair," I responded, smiling. "Still I would much prefer to go that way. I enjoy the exercise so much."

And so it was arranged. I had no dress for this sort of thing, and I felt a trifle out of place when she joined me on the porch arrayed in a complete riding habit of black. From her gauntlets to her silver-handled whip, her attire was complete. I flushed.

"You know I am not accustomed to

riding — will you pardon my appearance?"

"It makes no difference whatever!" She laughed merrily. "The feathers don't make the bird, and I am perfectly satisfied."

My mount was the same animal I had been used to, and the horse which had been led out for her was a wiry, dapple-gray mare of impatient blood. I knew the correct thing to do, and while I feared that I could not perform the service successfully, I determined to try. So as she walked towards the fretful mare which a negro was with difficulty restraining, I stepped forward, doffed my hat, and with "Permit me, Miss Salome," I bent, and hollowed my hand for the reception of her foot. With the naturalness and grace of a queen she placed the sole upon my palm, and I lifted her to the spring as though she had been a feather, and she

sank into the saddle and grasped the reins, which she proceeded to draw taut with no uncertain hold. With my cheeks burning slightly — I was not used to waiting upon women — I sought my saddle, and we cantered away.

How well the poet knew when he sang —

"What is so rare as a day in June?"

The bright morning sun blessed us with a benison of light; the sweet, cool, scented air laid its thousand tiny hands lightly upon our faces, and the green stretches of country all around us spoke of an earthly paradise. For a while we said nothing, for that sorceress, June, had thrown her web about us, and we were moving as through the vistas of a dream. Once I glanced at my companion, and I saw such a peaceful, happy, yet thoroughly unconscious look upon her face that I stayed the casual

remark upon my tongue which I felt that courtesy required. Then it dawned upon me with the suddenness of a revelation that her nature was attuned to mine, and all at once I knew that the sylvan sounds and scenes which were the delight of my soul were as manna to hers as well. And I had shunned her!

"I fear you will think me a poor escort," she said at length, smiling at me with a trace of sadness. "But I have been away so long, and all these meadows, and trees, and brooks are friends — you don't know how I love them. I have lived with them and in them since I could walk, and it is like seeing dear ones in the flesh to come back and be with them, and hold silent communion with them. Does this sound strange to you?"

"No." And yet I looked at her half perplexedly. My idols were being

shattered one by one. "No, it is not strange to me that such feelings exist, for they are my own. That was why I sought this old-fashioned Kentucky home. I lived in Louisville until I came here, and my soul was being crushed out of me between four brick walls. I have been happy here; I did not know what happiness was until I came here — except that derived from books. But that sort of happiness you feel; this sort you live, and your being is broadened by it. But you — I confess it sounds strange to me to hear you say such things."

"Why should I not know them as well as you? My opportunities have been greater."

"I don't know; I have no reason to give. In my ignorance and selfishness I had thought that I was alone in this; that no one could listen to Nature's secrets but myself. I have been

wrong, and I am glad that I have been undeceived."

The congeniality which became quickly established between us made our seven-mile ride very short. Our horses were in good mettle, and the road was fine. Before I knew where we were, we turned into a by-road bordered by locust trees, and cantered down to St. Catherine's Academy. The lawn before the three-story brick building was beautifully kept. I hitched our horses, and as we strolled up the pavement towards the entrance, I saw two or three figures moving about the premises, clad in the becoming black-and-white garb of the order. Presently one sister espied us, and immediately started our way. She was very old, and moved with slow, short steps. Salome ran to her with a little cry of joy, bent down and kissed the wrinkled face, and, as I came up, introduced me to Sister Hyacintha. I

shall never forget the patient, joyful, almost heavenly look on the face of this good woman. She led us to the porch, and gave us chairs, and she and Salome talked, while I listened. As it was nearing the noon hour, we were prevailed upon to stay and take lunch. In the afternoon we were shown through the building, and took a walk over the grounds. Time slipped by stealthily, and the sun was hovering above the western horizon when Salome remembered that St. Rose was yet to be seen.

A short ride over a narrow dirt road winding through masses of verdure brought us to the confines of the old church, which, perched upon a hill, reared its turret aloft in the purple air. I fastened our horses to some of the numerous hitching-posts placed along the roadside for the use of worshippers, and we turned to the iron gate leading into the premises. As this clanged behind

us we both felt keenly the jar it created, for everything was so still and peaceful that the slightest noise was irrelevant, and we felt bound to talk in whispers. We found ourselves upon a gravel walk bordered by cedars; to our left was the road, to our right the white stones of a vast burying ground rose up like spectral sentinels of the tomb.

Salome put her hand upon my arm. The path was steep, and I should have offered her assistance, but I had not thought of it. Not a word was spoken until we had reached the end of the path. Here the brow of the hill curved around in the form of a semicircle, and was studded with cedars, like emeralds in a crown. Before us, not a dozen steps away, rose the ancient edifice we had come to view. It was made of solid masonry, and seemed good for hundreds of years to come.

"Here we are."

Salome was panting a little as she said this, in a barely audible voice. I looked at the gray pile in silent contemplation. Its style suggested massiveness, although the building was not of any great size. The part comprising the vestibule and bell-tower was octagon in shape, and the turret was at least a hundred feet in air. Behind this were the ivy-covered walls of the body of the church. It was at that time when the earth grows still before drawing her night robes about her. In the western sky the sun's last streamers flared out like a gorgeous fan, and on their tips some shy diamonds glittered evasively. From the fields around us came the sweet breath of the spring, smelling of the richer fragrance of early summer. The birds were still; the stamping of our horses in the road below was the only sound.

"Shall we go in?"

I started, although the tones were low and like the music of rippling water. When I turned my head, the brown eyes looking into mine had a mournful expression. The impressiveness of it all was upon her, too. There must have been a certain look of inquiry upon my face, for she went on, in the same wonderful voice:

"It's never locked, you know. I like that custom about a Catholic church. So often the soul would enter into a holy place and be alone in prayer. Shall we enter? I think there is enough light for us to see."

In reply, I drew closer to her, and held out my arm. She took it lightly, and in the deepening twilight we walked to the broad, wooden door. It yielded reluctantly to the pressure of my hand, on account of its size and weight, and together we entered the shadows of the sacred place.

XI

THE door settled heavily into place behind us, and we were in almost complete darkness. Somewhere in front of us was a glimmer of light. I felt the slight figure at my side drawing me forward, and I put myself under her guidance. Crossing the vestibule, we passed into the room beyond. Although we trod lightly, the bare floor sent up sounds which echoed loudly, it seemed to us. A ghostly light filled the chamber into which we had come, and made it look much larger than it really was. The roof was lost above us, but there, before us, were the plain, brown, wooden benches forming the pews, and the nave

leading down to the altar railing. Along this a worn strip of carpet was placed. Slowly we went forward, awed by the silent majesty of a place of worship. All at once there came to me a realization of the peculiar position in which I was placed — walking down a church aisle with a beautiful girl upon my arm — and my face grew red. I could tell it by the hot tingling at my neck and temples, but the gloom was deep enough to hide it from her. The sudden force of what such a proceeding as this might mean made my heart — my staid, old, methodical heart — throb unwontedly. I hoped that the gloved hand resting so near to it did not feel its throbbings, although they sounded in my ears like a hammer on an anvil.

We had reached the railing. Before us rose the altar, with its images and its unlit tapers, its cloth of gold, and its silver appurtenances. A stretch of

carpeted floor lay between it and us. Directly this side the railing was a narrow ledge. Salome suddenly bent her knees and rested them upon this, placed her elbows upon the railing and bent her head in her hands. For a moment I gazed at the black bowed figure, then found myself imitating her attitude. In the stillness of the old church we knelt alone. Around us was utter silence, and the paling light of a dead day. Perhaps in the dark corners the ghosts of confessed sins were lurking; above the spot where we knelt many a "*Benedicite*" had fallen upon humble hearts waiting to receive it. She was praying. Perhaps confessing to the Great Absolver the sinless sins which bore no crimson stain, and praying His favor for the ones she loved. As well might a flower of the fields bow down and breathe out tales of grave misdeeds, for her heart was like a flower — yea,

like the closed cup of a lily at night, garbed in purity as white as holiness.

I watched her through the fingers I had placed over my face. This surely was no sin, for my own heart was not still enough for prayer. She was very still, and only her small ear and a portion of her cheek were visible. What did this half-stifling feeling mean which rose up in my throat? I had never seen a woman in prayer, alone. Away back through the dimly lit aisles which led to a distant boyhood my mind had sometimes strayed, and viewed a small white figure kneeling at its mother's side at bedtime. That was myself, and her petitions were doubtless sent up by the little cot where I lay asleep. A young girl praying! It is as sacred as the miracle of birth. And by this simple act, this girl had placed in me a greater trust than words could speak. She deemed me good enough to be by

her side when she approached her Creator — and was I worthy? I knew I was not. And though my life had been free from those polluting sins which glow like rubies in the souls of some men, I felt that here I had no fitting place, that her prayers would be clogged by the unholiness of my presence. She knelt, immovable as the statued Christ which hung almost over our heads. The glow in the stained-glass windows to our left had turned to a gray blur; the outlines of her figure were growing indistinct. As suddenly and as quickly as she had knelt, she arose, and with the freedom of a child took my arm as we retraced our steps.

A young moon was tilted over in the sky near the horizon as we gained the open. The limitless depths above us were aglow with millions of sparkling stars. We stood for a moment before going down to our horses.

"We 'll be a little late getting back."

Again it was my companion who broke the silence.

"I 'm sorry, for it will be because of me."

She laughed, — the bubbling notes so like the falling of a forest rivulet over a low rock ledge.

"It will not matter, unless we count the loss of sleep. Mother and father know how I love the night, and when they know where I am, and whom I am with, they are not concerned."

"I would gladly lose a night's rest for an experience like this. You have made me very much your debtor. How solemn and beautiful it all is!" My eyes took in all visible things in a comprehensive glance. "Do you come here often?"

"No; I only care to come at the close of day, and my parents are getting too old to be dragged around to humor

my whims. It is too far to come alone, and so I miss it."

"Then did I really perform some sort of service for you in accompanying you here? I had imagined the favor all on your side."

"Let's call it square," she smiled. "I showed you the place, and you acted as my protector and escort. A very even bargain, I think. We had better go now. We will have a fine ride home."

It was very dark on the cedar-bordered walk down which we went, and while I longed to offer assistance, I refrained. When we came to the road, however, we found that there was enough light. The horses were restless at their posts, and we mounted with considerable difficulty after I had unhitched them. But Salome, peerless horsewoman that she was, quickly had hers in hand, and mine soon became

tractable of its own accord. We proceeded at a smart canter until we reached the turnpike. There Salome suggested a gallop, and I could do nothing but assent, although fast riding was something to which I was not accustomed. But I gradually accommodated myself to the long, undulating leaps of my mount, and then began to enjoy it. It was highly exhilarating as well as novel. Salome sat as though part of the animal she managed so well, and as we swept along I kept my eyes upon her in a kind of wonder. It was so new to me, and the skill with which her small hand managed her mettled horse was nothing short of a marvel.

We did not talk much during this part of our ride. Occasionally she would fling a remark across at me above the thud of the hammering feet, but I think the beauty of the night and the wonderful silence sat upon our minds,

and made our tongues unwilling for speech. Sometimes the road was open and clear, and then I could see her eyes, like veiled stars. And around and about us were fields of growing corn and ripening wheat, and infolding us close, as in a filmy garment, was that indescribable odor of green things and of dew-wet turf. Then the pike would sweep around a curve, like the stretch of a winding river, and bordering each side of the highway were clumps and rows of gigantic forest-trees. Oftentimes their boughs would intertwine above, and what seemed to be the black mouth of a tunnel would confront us. Into this apparent pit of darkness we would dash, but the horses never shied. They knew well the ground their fleet hoofs were spurning, and they knew that farther on was home, — a good stall, and a rack full of musky clover hay. Under the trees I could not see

Salome. Now and again some sparks of fire would shoot out when a hoof struck a stone. Then out into the open again. The pace our steeds had assumed of their own free will was no mean one, and when scarcely an hour had gone we were riding slowly through the meadow to the big whitewashed gate giving entrance to the yard. The young moon had grown weary, and tumbled out of the sky; but the stars seemed brighter—they looked as though the dew which sparkled on the grass below us had washed their tiny faces on its way to earth. The Milky Way appeared as a phantom lace curtain stretched across the sky.

I opened the gate from my horse, and held it back for Salome to pass through. When she had done this, I followed, and the gate clanged back. The noise of its shutting notified Inky and Jim of our arrival, for they were

waiting sleepily as we came up to the fine stone steps of the old home, and at once took charge of the horses. I helped Salome up the steps by placing my hand beneath her elbow. We stood for a moment on the edge of the porch.

"We must move around gently," I suggested. "The old folks have doubtless been asleep an hour."

"Bless their dear hearts!" she answered with earnest fervor. "Mother says you move like a mouse," she resumed, and I could see the faint glint of her teeth as she smiled. "My room is upstairs, and I am not so likely to disturb them. Have you enjoyed your day?"

"It has been *very* pleasant," I answered warmly. "I feel more grateful to you than I can say for being so nice to a stranger who happens to be a guest in your home. But I love the woods,

and the fields, and the pure, fresh air which blows straight down from heaven. This much we have in common. Will you let me go with you again — sometimes? I would not bore you, nor presume too much."

In my great earnestness I had come closer to her.

"I am out of doors a great deal, and you may go with me often, if you wish. I enjoyed having you to-day."

This was said just as seriously as my question had been put. Then, in one of those rare changes of which her nature was capable, she added:

"You know I need a protector in my various rambles, and you shall be my esquire when I go forth in state to see my flower subjects scattered all over the farm. My knight-errant, too, to espouse my cause should snake, or dog, or an enraged animal of the pastures seek to do me harm."

"Gladly, your majesty," I answered gallantly, falling into the spirit which her words betokened, and bowing low. "Behold your vassal; command me when you will."

A whispered "good-night," a faint echo of that enchanting laugh, and she had slipped through the door and was gone.

I did not tarry long, for the beauty of the night had suddenly paled. Everything had grown darker, and, by habit, I thought of my easy-chair and pipe, and went in also. Salome was standing at the farther end of the long, broad hall, with a lighted candle in her hand. Her hat had been removed, and her tangled hair was half down. The riding habit had also disappeared, and she was robed in some sort of a loose house gown which fell away into a train. Her back was towards me, and she had one foot on the first step of the curved stairway

which went up from that point. She heard me turn the key in the lock, and looked back. I went towards her; why, I do not know. She waited until I had come quite close.

"I have n't anything very particular to say," I began, I fear very confusedly. But my foolish feet had led me to her, obedient to the dictates of a foolish mind, and I had to speak first.

"I have been in mother's room," she answered, opening her eyes very wide, as a child does when it hears a sound in the dark. "I went for this wrapper, and would you believe it, I did not waken either of them! Mother sleeps very lightly, too!"

"You have performed quite a feat," I assured her, at once put at ease by her genuineness. "Have you planned anything for to-morrow?"

"Father has some sheep on the lower farm that are sick, and I am going to

take them some salt, because that is good for their blood."

"May I help you salt the sheep? I'll carry the salt, if you will let me go."

She turned her head sideways, with a slight uplifting of the brows, as though hesitating.

"Ye-e-e-s, I guess so," she replied at last, doubtfully. "Do you know anything about sheep?"

"Nothing more than I have read. They are very docile, I believe, and a great many of our clothes come from their backs."

"But that is n't all." There was the wisdom of Solomon on the fresh young face, shadowed by disarranged tresses. "Some of them have horns, like a cow, only they grow back instead of out. And they'll run you sometimes, when they take a notion. Can you run, Mr. Stone?"

The picture which came to my mind of the staid and dignified Abner Stone flying across a meadow with coat-tails streaming, and an irate ram at his heels, brought a broad smile to my face.

"Yes; I *can* run. But I promise not to desert you if danger comes."

"Then be ready in the morning. I will say good-night again, for I know you must tell this day's doings to your pipe before you retire."

Our entire conversation at the foot of the stair had been in low whispers, and I whispered back her good-night, and turned to go. Then, like Lot's wife, I looked behind me. She had reached the first landing, where the stairway curved. She saw me, and peered forward, holding the candle above her head. The loose sleeve of her dress fell back with the motion, and the bare symmetry of her rounded forearm gleamed upon the blackness like ivory

upon ebony. I waved my hand; she waved hers, then was gone.

I sank into a chair and bowed my head in my hands, my soul torn by the pangs of a new birth.

XII

ONLY a few old negroes were astir when I stepped from the house the next morning. Even the master had not arisen. The stars and the sun's forerunners were having a battle on the broad field overhead; one by one the stars were vanquished and their lamps extinguished. I stood upon the lowest step of the flight in front of the house, and watched the misty, uncertain shapes of trees and bushes gradually evolve themselves into distinguishable outlines. The process was slow, because a kind of vapor lay upon everything, and it resisted strenuously the onslaught of the sun. But it gave way, as darkness ever must before light, and, as if by

magic, the curtain which night had placed was rolled away, and little by little the landscape was revealed. Along the creek, which ran just beyond the pike, and parallel with it, hung a dense wall of fog, against which it seemed the arrows of day fell, blunted. The air was cool and fresh, and I drew it deep down into my lungs, feeling the sluggish blood start afresh with each draught.

With the dawning of that day came the dawning of a new life for me. I realized that I had been living in a darkened room, and that a window had suddenly been thrown open, letting in upon me a shower of golden light, with the songs of birds and the incense of flowers. My old life had been a contented one, had known the pleasures to be derived from association with books and God's great out-door miracles. The new life, whose silver dawn was be-

ginning to tip my soul with a strange radiance, held untold joys which belong rightly to heaven, and which numbed my mind as I strove blindly after comprehension. I was as a little child left all at once alone upon the world. I stood, helpless, trying to centralize my disordered thoughts, with a strange oppressed feeling in my breast which deep respirations could not drive away. I was deeply, deeply troubled, and my mind was in a maze. But one idea possessed me, and that doggedly asserted itself, overriding the tumult in my brain. I was longing, madly longing, to see again her whom I *loved.* The word in my mind was like the touch of a white-hot iron, and I started as if stung, and fell to pacing nervously up and down. It could not be; it could not be! That child of nineteen, — I a man of forty-five! The idea was monstrous! What an old fool I had been! I did

not know my own mind, that was all. I would be all right in a day or two. But still that sinking feeling weighed above my heart, and my usually calm pulse was rioting with something other than exercise.

"Let it be love!" I cried at last, in my troubled soul. "The painful bliss of this half hour's experience is worth the cost of denial, for she shall never know!"

Thus did I, poor worm, commune in my fool's heaven, recking not, nor knowing, that I was setting at naught the plans of my Creator.

At breakfast I was myself, although my hand trembled when I conveyed food to my mouth, and I felt my cheeks coloring when she came in a little late, arrayed in a pink-flowered, flowing gown, and looking as fresh as though she had just risen, bathed in dew, from the blue-and-crimson cup of a morning-glory.

"How did you rest after your night ride?" she smiled, sitting by me and resting her elbows on the edge of the table, then pillowing her round chin in her pink palms.

"I slept better for my outing," I answered promptly, lying with the ease of a schoolboy. The truth was, my sleep had been broken and poor.

"It's a good thing for Stone that you're back," thundered Mr. Grundy. "You're so everlastingly fond of running over all creation, and he has the rovingest disposition I ever saw. Goin' down to salt those sheep this mornin', S'lome?"

"Yes, sir, I made a compact with Mr. Stone last night to act as my esquire on all my expeditions. You've often said I should have some one to go along with me."

"Don't let her impose on you, Stone," responded the old gentleman, throwing

a quick wink in my direction. "She's young, you know, and don't know as much as mother. She'll have you climbing an oak tree to get a young hawk out of its nest likely as not."

Salome laughed, while I boldly assured them that I would make the effort should she desire such a thing. Mrs. Grundy was quiet, as usual. She contented herself listening to the conversation of the others, and seldom took her eyes off the girl it was plain to see she worshipped.

"Get ready for a walk this morning, Mr. Stone!" called Salome, a short time after breakfast, peeping over the balustrades at the top of the stair. "The lower farm is about two miles, and the walk will be good for us."

"I'll get my hat and stick; are you coming now?"

"As soon as I can get in another dress. I'll meet you in the locust grove. Tell

Tom to get you the salt, and I 'll be there before you have missed me."

She was gone with a pattering of little feet.

I went into my room for my stick and hat with a grim smile upon my face. The steady ground which I had thought beneath me was becoming shifting sand. I went slowly around the house to the negro quarters with bowed head, briefly gave Tom his mistress' orders, and stood apathetically while the darky hastened away to obey.

A quick scurrying in the grass, and the pressure of two small paws upon my trousers' leg brought me to myself, and I bent down to pat the yellow head of Fido, who had espied me, and instantly besought recognition.

"You poor, dumb, faithful thing," I apostrophized, looking at the bright eyes which shone love into mine. "You are spared this agony of soul,

and the futile efforts to solve problems which cannot be known. You love me, and I love you; why could we both not be content?"

"Is Fido going, too?"

I composed my face with an effort, and straightened up as the cheery voice hailed me. She was coming towards me like a woodland sprite, floating, it seemed to me, for her gliding step was so free from any pronounced undulation. Her dress of blue checked gingham just escaped the ground, and she wore a gingham sunbonnet with two long strings, which she held in either hand. The sunbonnet was tilted back, and her laughing face, with its rich, delicate under-color of old wine, was fit for a god to kiss.

"Yes, we will take him along if you do not object. He was the companion of my rambles before you came. We will make a congenial three."

Tom approached with a bucket of salt, which, after an exaggerated scrape of the foot and a pull at his forelock, he handed to me, and we set out.

Our way led through the orchard at the back of the house, where grew, I think, all sorts of apples known to man. Each bough was freighted with its burden of round, green fruit, and here and there an Early Harvest tree was spattered with golden patches, where the ripened apples hung in their green bower. Beyond the orchard lay a woods pasture, formed of a succession of gentle swells, the heavy bluegrass turf soft as an Oriental carpet to the feet, while scattered about were hundreds of magnificent trees, mostly oak and poplar. Dotting the sward were numerous little white balls on long stems, — dandelions gone to seed. These Salome plucked constantly, and, filling her cheeks with wind, would

blow like Boreas, until her face was purple. When I inquired the purpose of this queer performance, I was shyly informed that it was to tell if her sweetheart loved her. If she blew every one of the pappus off at one breath, he loved her; if she did n't, he did n't love her. She was certainly very much concerned about the matter, for every ball she came to she plucked and blew. Sometimes all the pappus disappeared, and sometimes they did n't, and so she never reached a decided conclusion.

The pasture crossed, a rail fence rose up before us. I at once stepped forward to let down a gap, but Salome halted me.

"The idea!" she declared. "I don't mind that at all. You stand just where you are, and turn your back; I 'll call you when I 'm over."

I blushed, and obeyed.

A wheat-field of billowy gold

stretched before us when I joined her. A narrow path ran through it, curving sinuously, as a path made by chance will. This we followed, Salome going in front. The wheat was ready for the reaper, and the full heads were swelled to bursting. Salome gathered some, threshed them between her hands, blew out the chaff, and offered me part of the grain, eating the other herself. It was pasty, but not unpleasant, and I ate it because it was her gift. We were walking peacefully along, through the waist-high grain, when Salome gave a little scream and jumped back, plump into my arms. Even in my excitement I saw the tail of a black snake vanishing across the path. I released her quickly, of course, but the touch of her figure was like wine in my veins.

"I beg your pardon!" she said humbly; "but the ugly thing fright-

ened me. It darted out so quickly, and I almost stepped upon it. You could n't get one of the negroes to follow this path any farther. They are very superstitious, you know, and are firm believers in signs."

"I 'm sorry you were startled so; perhaps I had better go in front," I ventured.

"No; you sha'n't. I 'm not really afraid of snakes, except when I run upon one unexpectedly. I kill them when I get a chance."

And so she started out again in advance of me, and began telling the various beliefs of the negroes. I learned from her that their lives were almost governed by "signs," and that some very trivial thing would deter them from a certain course of action. There were ways to escape the spell of witches, to avoid snakes, and to keep from being led into a morass by jack-o'-lanterns.

This folk-lore of the darkies was exceedingly interesting to me, told in the charming manner which characterized the speech of my companion.

The wheat-field ended at the pike, and here another fence was passed in the same manner as the first one. Then we swung down the dusty road together, side by side. To the right and left of us dog-fennel was blooming, and the "Jimpson" weed flared its white trumpets in a brave show. Occasionally a daisy lifted its yellow, modest head, and Salome took great delight in getting me to tell her which was daisy and which was fennel. My ignorance caused many a blunder, to her high amusement; but at last I discovered that the daisy's head was larger than that of its humble brother. A half-mile's walk along the pike brought us to an old sagging gate, which I pushed open, and we went through. A grassy hill was

before us, sloping down to a cool hollow where a spring bubbled out from beneath a moss-grown old rock.

There were trees and bushes, and a soft green bank, and we joined hands and ran like two school-children till we reached the spring. Of course she must have a drink, so down she knelt, and plunged her pouting lips into the cool water. Her hair, tangled and loosened by our run, fell in wavy strands about her face. When she had drunk her fill, it was my turn, and so I stretched out full length, and carefully put my lips just where hers had been. Never had water tasted so sweet! I was taking it in, in long, cool swallows, when a sudden pressure on the back of my head bobbed my face deep into the spring. I turned my head with a smile, to find her standing back and laughing like a child at the trick she had played.

"You rascal!" I fumed good-naturedly, "I'll pay you back!"

Another peal of laughter was her only answer, caused, no doubt, by my wet face and the water dripping from my chin.

"Yonder come the sheep," she said. "Get up, and let's salt them."

I arose and picked up the bucket. Coming slowly up the hollow were five or six shabby-looking sheep. Their wool stood on them in patches, and they seemed scarcely able to walk.

"What's the matter with them?" I queried.

"See how rusty the poor things look!" Her voice told of deep concern. "Father says they have the scab, and it must be a dreadful disease, like leprosy. Let's go meet them, and save them the trouble of walking so far."

I could not help smiling at the tender heart this speech betrayed, but I

went with her. As we neared the sorry-looking group, Salome took a handful of salt and placed it upon a large flat stone. They rushed at it eagerly, despite their weakened state, and lapped it with their tongues. We put out more salt, at a dozen different places, so that all might have enough, then went back to the bank by the spring, and while she sat down in the shade and held her bonnet in her lap, I reclined by her side, and looked up at her, content.

XIII

"DO you love the country as much as you seem to?" she asked, gazing blissfully up at the dense foliage of the elm tree under which we were resting.

"I could not love it more; it is a wonder which never ends, and an enduring delight. If I could think that Paradise was like this day, and this place, I would not care when death came."

"I 'm so glad," she answered, with the simplicity and directness of a child. "I have been in cities, and I don't see how a soul can live there. It seems to me that mine would cramp and dwindle until it died if I had to live in a big town. Even the large and beautiful places of worship speak more of the

human than of the divine. It seems that men go because they must, and that women go to show their clothes. This is my religion and my temple." She smiled in real joy as she waved her hand about her in a gesture comprehending everything bounded by the horizon. "Look at the roof of my temple. Was there ever one so high built by mortals, and was there ever a pigment mixed that could give it the tint which mine holds? And it is not always the same. To-day it is a pale blue, marked with delicate lines of cloud. At twilight it will darken to azure; to-night it will be studded with a million gems. And no prayer falls back from that roof upon the head of the sender, for the stars are the portholes through which they go to heaven. Do you never think that way?"

I shook my head slowly.

"It is very beautiful," I said, "and

equally true, no doubt, but I had never thought of it in just that way. I love this life because I can't help but love it. The forests, the meadows, the fields, and the brooks are what my soul craves; yet if you ask me why, I cannot tell you. I have been happier the few short weeks I have spent in your home than I was all the rest of my life. Since you have come, my happiness has deepened."

I dared not look up, but kept my eyes on the four-leaf clover I was plucking to pieces.

"I 'm glad I 've helped make your visit pleasant."

Her voice was in the same low sweet tones which she had before employed, and I knew by this she attached no particular significance to my last sentence.

"When mother wrote me that you had come to board with us, I was a little displeased, for I was jealous of the sweet accord in which we all dwelt, and did

not want it marred. But when she told me all about you, and your habits, my feelings changed. I do not wish to draw any unjust comparisons, but there are very few people with tastes and inclinations like yours and mine, — don't you think so ? "

This naïve frankness almost amused me.

" I think you are right. I never knew any one who would care for just the things we do, and they are certainly the most innocent pleasures which the world affords."

A sudden darkening of the landscape and a breath of cool air accentuated the silence which fell at this point. We both looked up, and saw the edge of a blue-black cloud peeping over the shoulder of a northwestern hill.

" I 'm afraid we 'll get wet," said Salome, rising hastily, and surveying her airy garments dubiously. " There is n't

even a cabin between here and home. I would n't care a fig, but mother always hates for me to be out in a storm. We can only do our best, and walk rapidly."

With the salt bucket in my left hand, and her hand in my right, I helped her up the hill the best I could. Fido limped behind. He had been lost nearly all the time since we started, — chasing rabbits, doubtless, — and had only made his appearance a few moments before the cloud startled us. We gained the pike directly, and as we hurried towards the wheat-field the cloud grew with alarming rapidity, and a scroll-work of flame began to show about its outer edges.

"Is n't it beautiful?" whispered Salome. "But we 're going to catch it."

And we did. Half-way across the wheat-field the first big drops splashed

against our faces, blown by strong gusts of wind. I gazed around helplessly for shelter. A few yards to our right rose the cumbersome shape of a last year's straw-rick; it was better than nothing.

"Come!" I said, taking her arm firmly. "I'll find you shelter."

She consented silently, and I crushed a path for her through the ripe grain until we reached the rick. The rain was beginning to pelt us sharply. Furiously I went to work, tearing out straw by the handfuls, armfuls, and in a few seconds I had excavated a hole large enough for Salome to enter in a crouching posture.

"Get in!" I commanded. I think she little liked the tone of authority I had assumed, for if there ever was a petted being, it was she, yet she obeyed, and cuddled up in her refuge out of reach of the driving rain.

I sat down by the side of her covert,

and rested my back against the rick. I also turned up my coat-collar, and pulled my hat well down upon my head; but I soon saw that a good soaking was in store for me.

"Why don't you come in, too?" she asked in guileless innocence. "I can make room for you, and you will surely get wet out there. Aren't you afraid of rheumatism? Father has it if he gets his toe damp."

"I'll get along all right," I replied. "There doesn't much rain strike me, and I never had the rheumatism in my life."

I didn't tell her of the trouble with my breathing, and the attack that would be almost sure to follow this exposure.

We both grew quiet after this, and listened to the swish of the rain and the mighty howling of the wind. It had grown very dark, and the air was chilly. The lightning was incessant,

and traced zigzag pathways of fire across the sombre heavens. The thunder was terrific, and often shook the solid earth. I asked Salome if she was not afraid, but she laughed from her snug retreat, and said she loved it all. What manner of girl was this, who feared nothing, and who loved Nature even when she was at war with herself?

The strife of the elements ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The thunder rumbled away in the east; the rain stopped falling, and a rift of blue showed through the dun masses overhead. This was followed by a broad shaft of sunlight, which struck on the golden sea around us with a shimmering radiance. I jokingly called Salome a "hayseed" when she emerged from her shelter, for her brown hair was sprinkled with wisps of straw. She ignored the epithet in her solicitation for my welfare, and proceeded straightway to place

her hand upon my shoulders and back to see if I was wet.

"You 're soaking!" she declared in genuine alarm. "You must have a hot whiskey toddy and six grains of quinine the minute you get home!"

I made a wry face; but she only shook her head in a determined way, and announced that she would see to it in person. As for herself, she was as dry as a butterfly which had just emerged from a chrysalis, and I congratulated myself upon the care I had taken of her. But before we reached home she was in a plight almost equal to my own, for the wind had blown the wheat across the path, and it was impossible for me to remove it entirely.

As a consequence, her ladyship was at once hustled off to bed by good Mrs. Grundy, and treated to the same remedy she had prescribed for me. I took a rather stiff toddy, and changed my

clothes, and felt no ill effects from my experience.

After the first wild flush which had attended the discovery of the awakening of my affection for this girl had subsided, I became, in a degree, calmer. But it was there, deep in my soul, and I could feel it growing, growing, as steadily as my heart was beating. And I was old enough to know that in time it would conquer me, and drag me to her feet like a fettered slave before his master. My will seemed, in a measure, paralyzed, and I made no effort to escape. Something warned me that it would be useless. And so I drifted, living in a careless sort of lotos dream, which I could have wished would last forever. Now there were scented, joyful days, when we strolled through dales and wooded hollows, listening to Nature's great orchestra as it played its never-ending symphony. Perfect nights, when

the heavy air would be redolent of the honeysuckles' wafted souls and the breath of sleepy roses. From the cabins in the locust grove would float the tinkling of the banjo, the untrained guffaw of the negro men, and the wild, half-barbaric notes of an old-time melody. And the stars would shine in glory above us, and we would sit on the steps and talk of the things we both loved. The old folks on the settee would get sleepy and go in, and we would sit there by the hour, and still my secret was my own. I think she guessed it, but this blissful existence was too sweet to be ended by some foolish words which had better remain forever in my heart, even though they ate it out.

XIV

AUGUST came. It was half gone ere I realized that she would go back to Bellwood early in September. How and where the days had gone I could not tell. Week after week had slipped by, and, forgetting that time was passing, I lived in my fool's paradise, and gave no thought to the days that were speeding away on silken wings. Harvest had come and gone; the fierce heat of a Kentucky summer made the days sultry, but the nights were good to live. I had lived through it all as in a kind of waking dream. But in the worship-chamber of my heart I had built an altar, and on it was placed the first and only love

of my life. The fire which glowed there was as pure as Easter dawn, yet it was as intense as the still white heat you may see in a furnace. And the time was coming when she would go away.

One night I wandered, restless, down into the tree-grown yard. We had sat together that night, as usual, but my lips had been mute. The time had come when there was but one thing to say, and I had resolved not to say it. And so she had left me early, saying, in her impetuous way, that I was unsociable. Back and forth the long avenue I paced, thinking of the day she came home, of the many, many times we had been together; thinking of the pure, unselfish, Christian womanhood which crowned her with its consecrating light. Back and forth, back and forth, and her sweet young face burned itself into my mind with every step I took. Down the avenue, then up, and I leaned

against the corrugated trunk of an oak, and fastened my eyes upon the windows of her room. The blinds were drawn, but she was up, for a light showed through them. Salome! Salome! — that was the one thought of my mind, the one bitter cry from my aching heart. There was a shadow on the curtain; a bare, uplifted arm was silhouetted against it. God bless you, Salome! My Salome! Good-night!

The next day I kept to my room, sending word that my head was troubling me. In the afternoon I went out and sat upon the porch, turning my troubled face towards the peaceful west. The sun was sinking, swathed in purple robes. Far stretching on either side were azure seas, with dun-colored islands dotting their broad expanses. Below me wound the dusty pike, like a yellow ribbon, flanked on one side by the half-dry creek, and on the other by a field

of tasselled corn. A crow sat upon the dead limb of a sycamore, and cawed, and cawed, in noisy unrest. The weight which had been placed upon my breast two months before seemed like a millstone now. The consciousness of hopelessness made it heavier than before.

"Has your headache gone, Mr. Stone?"

She had come to the doorway without my knowledge, and now advanced towards me with a tender, questioning look upon her face.

"Yes," I answered in quiet desperation, turning my face from her. "The pain has gone to my heart."

She stood beside me, silently, and I felt the muscles hardening in my cheeks, as I shut my jaws tight to keep back the flood of words which rushed to my lips, and clamored for utterance. Presently I felt that I could speak rationally.

"How long before you return to school?"

"Three weeks; I wish I did not have to go."

"Let's walk down to the grape-vine swing," I proposed abruptly, turning to her with set face.

She held her sunbonnet in her hand, — the same bonnet she always wore out of doors about the farm, — and she settled it on her brown, fluffy hair as I arose. The swing was in one corner of the yard, quite away from the house, and it had come to be one of our favorite resorts at twilight. This afternoon she occupied it, as was her custom, and I sat at the base of a walnut tree close by her. Something had fallen upon her usually gay spirits, and checked the outpourings of her mind. She sat silent, holding to the arms of her swing, and looking with earnest eyes out over the varied landscape. I watched her,

while the fierce pulsings of my temples blurred my eyes, and made her seem as in a sea of mist. The noises of the day had lulled to echoes. The peace of a summer twilight was stealing stealthily over all the land. From a far-off pasture came the silvery tinkle of a sheep-bell; the unutterably mournful cooing of a dove was borne from the forest. The whispering leaves above us rustled gently before the approach of the Angel of the Dusk. The sylvan solitude became as an enchanted spot where none were living but she and I. Why — oh, why could it not last forever, just as it was that moment! But Time does not halt for love or hate, and she was going away, — out of my life, to leave it as a barren rock in a burning desert. The intense longing of my gaze caused her to turn towards me. She dropped her eyes, while her cheeks grew rosy as the sunset.

"Salome!"

The sweet name fell in trembling accents from my lips. She caught her breath quickly, but did not look up. I arose and stood before her, with my hands clasped in front of me.

"I love you, Salome!" I said in husky tones, for my voice would barely come. "You have called into life that love which God has given every man. It possesses me as utterly as the winds of heaven possess the earth. It has made me as weak as a child, and, like a child, I have told you. I was not strong enough to keep it from you. Should you detest me for giving way as I have, I would not blame you. I am a middle-aged man; you are a little girl, and I have no right to ask anything from you. Your life is before you; mine is over half spent. But I love you, and I would die for you, Salome — Salome, my precious one!"

I turned from her, and set my teeth upon my lip, for my confession had shaken my soul to its uttermost depths. Not for the earth, nor for heaven would I have touched her white hand. Through the swirling blood which benumbed my consciousness I felt a presence near me, — her presence. I turned with a low cry. She was standing there, close to me. Her bonnet had fallen off, and in the deep twilight her brown hair glowed like an aureole about a saint. One swift, hurt, appealing glance from her uplifted eyes, and she sank, quivering, upon my breast, sobbing, "Abner! Abner!"

God of mercy, I thank thee! I thank thee!

Once more we sat on the steps. The bewitching beauty of the August night lay around us. The yellow harvest moon sailed on as calmly as though it

were used to beholding lovers. I held her hand in a kind of stupefied satisfaction, feeling as though under the spell of some powerful opiate. She was so close to me! — the skirt of her gingham gown had fallen over one of my feet. I touched her hair, so tenderly, and smoothed it back from her pure forehead. How could it be? This young creature, so full of life and health, encompassed with all that wealth and love could give — to love me! — me, a simple bookworm and lover of Nature, who had come into her life by chance. The golden hours of that enchanted night still glow like letters of fire upon the web of memory. It was the one perfect period in my quiet and uneventful existence, — the one brief time when life was full, and I held to my lips the cup of all earthly happiness. And the changing years cannot rob me of the recollection.

XV

THE next day Salome was seized with a severe headache. She did not leave the house, and of course I did not see her, as she stayed in her room upstairs. We felt no especial concern, although she was not accustomed to such attacks, and with the coming of night her head grew easier. I went out after supper to pace up and down the avenue, to smoke my pipe, and to watch the windows of her room. I remained in the yard till nearly eleven, and the light was still burning when I went in. The next morning Mrs. Grundy told me that Salome had some fever, and that a doctor had been sent

for. I heard the news in silent fear, and my heart sank. I longed to tell this good old woman what her daughter was to me; but Salome had said nothing about it, and I could not speak without her consent.

The doctor came, an important-looking young fellow whom I felt inclined to kick off the porch the moment he set foot on it. When he descended from the sick room he pompously announced that it was only an ordinary cold, which would quickly disappear before the remedies which he had left. But the days went by, and she grew no better, and I never saw her. How my heart hungered for a glance of her sweet face; how my eyes longed to look into the clear, brown depths of hers. One morning I was told that a leading physician from Louisville had been summoned. Dr. Yandel came — and stayed. Typhoid fever is a grim foe

which requires vigilance as well as medical skill.

I went about like one distraught with a cold hand gripping my heart. It was then she asked to see me. I went to her room for a few moments, and came out with my face gray, and a pitiful, broken prayer to God. Two weeks — and one night they came for me. Like a broken, shattered lily she lay, but her lips smiled with their last breath, and whispered — "Abner."

Blinded and weak, I groped my way out into the night, and sat down. My yellow dog found me, and crept, whining, between my knees. When I lifted my stricken face to the sky, I thought I saw a misty shallop touch the strand of heaven, and a slender white figure with brown hair step onto the plains of Paradise.

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